Study of the problems of Belarus-Poland borderland in the context of the EU enlargement

Research on Belarus-Poland Borderland

Belarus-Poland Borderland (Brief Historical Outline)

In the Early Middle Ages the territory of the future Belarus – Poland Borderland was dominated by Orthodox Eastern Slavs. In the 14th century the region becomes part of the Great Duchy of Lithuania. The western part of the region forms historical Podlachia, and becomes subject to vigorous Polish colonization. During the following centuries part of the province (Bielsk, Bely Stok) become part of the Polish Kingdom.[1]

In the 16-18th cc. the bigger part of the political elite (gentry) adopt Catholicism and identify themselves with Polish culture. After Union of Orthodox and Catholic Churches in 1596, an absolute majority of the Orthodox become members of the Uniate Church.

As a result of the 3rd partition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1795, the bigger part of the region becomes part of the Russian Empire.[2] In 1839 the Russian government abolishes the Church Union; the majority of the Uniates adopt Orthodoxy, the rest become Roman Catholics. With the rise of the Polish national movement Catholicism is more and more associated with the Polish culture, while Orthodoxy becomes associated with the Russian culture. However, the leaders of the Belarusian national movement of the 19th century belonged to both denominations.

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[1] In the 14th -16th cc. the Polish Kingdom and the Great Duchy of Lithuania conclude a number of treaties, which later lead to creation of a confederative state – the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (Rzeczpospolita, or Res Publica).

[2] In the early 19th century the whole region became part of the Russian Empire.

In 1921 the Soviet government and Poland conclude the Riga Peace Treaty. According to the Treaty, the whole Western Belarus becomes part of Poland. In 1921-1939 the local non-Polish population was subject to polonization, on one hand, and political and cultural discrimination, on the other hand.

After the German-Soviet Pact about partition of Poland and the beginning of the World War II in 1939, Bialystok and Hrodna regions become part of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic.

Under German occupation of 1941-1944 the region becomes part of the Eastern Prussia province, forming a Bialystok district.

In 1945 the Soviet-Polish treaty gives Bialystok region to Poland and sets a new border which still exists in the present.

Hrodna region, Belarus (General characteristics of the region)

Hrodna region is populated by around 1180 thousand people. According to the census of 1999, Belarusians make up 62%, Russians – 10%, and Poles – 24.8%.[3]

Description of the national situation in the region is complicated because of Russification of a part of Belarusians and Poles, as well as immaturity of the Polish national consciousness in the region. Thus, 65% of Poles in Hrodna region consider Belarusian their mother tongue, 16% say their mother tongue is Russian, and only 18% name Polish as their mother tongue. In everyday life Belarusian language is used by 61% of Belarusians, 58% of Poles and 8% of Russians. Besides that, 36% of Poles use Russian, and only 6% — Polish language in everyday life. Roman Catholic Church plays an important role in maintaining Polish identity (Poles make up 1/3 of Catholics in Belarus). Most likely, the bigger part of Poles have a weakened or mixed (Belarusian-Polish) identity.

Weakening of identity is typical for all national groups in the region; identity of practically all national groups in the region is quite vague (although it is stronger than in other regions of Belarus). In general, the population has a low level of political and cultural

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[2] Some Polish organizations claim there were violations made during the census which resulted in underestimation of the number of Poles in the region. Besides that, Polish organizations point out, that after 1939 the Soviet government artificially understated the number of Poles. Admittedly, the Polish authorities acted the similar way towards Belarusians in 1921-1939.

activity. Such a situation is preserved and reinforced by the state policy in this sphere.

National structure of the population in some districts of Hrodna region, visited by the mission

Hrodna city: population of about 300 thousand (Belarusians 56 %, Poles 22 %, Russians 18 %); Masty district: population of about 41 thousand (Belarusians 71%, Poles 21 %, Russians 6 %); Vaukavysk district: population of about 85 thousand (Belarusians 58 %, Poles 28 %, Russians 11 %); town of Vaukavysk: population of about 47 thousand (Belarusians 60%, Poles 25 %, Russians 12 %). Voranava district, bordering Lithuania, is an area with significant predominance of Polish population. In the 37-thousand population of Voranava (according to the census of 1999), Poles make up 82.96%, Belarusians – 10.53%, and Russians – 3.28%. This is the only district in Belarus, where representatives of the Polish national community have an absolute majority both among rural and urban population, forming a good basis for development of the Polish national movement. The city of Lida has 100 thousand residents, 38.3% of whom are Polish, 44.16% — Belarusian, and 13.98% — Russian. In Lida district the Polish national minority makes up 42.14%, Belarusians – 50.73%, and Russians – 5.61%. Lida and Hrodna are two big cities in the region where Poles make up a significant percentage of the population. Hrodna is an organizational and cultural center of the Polish movement. There is the central office of the Union of Poles of Belarus (of both its parts after the split) and a Polish school in Hrodna. The most significant Polish events are also held here.

Ethnical and cultural situation in the region

Poles. According to statistical data and research, the national identity of Poles in the region is quite vague. A significant part of the Belarusian Poles has a two-level identity, which includes both Polish: an interest to Polish language, culture, origin, and Belarusian ethnic elements: acceptance of the independent statehood of Belarus, sense of historical commonality with Belarusians, and respect of the Belarusian culture. Poles actively participated in the Belarusian national movement (especially in the early 1990'), some of them demonstrated active support to revival of the Belarusian language and strengthening of the Belarusian element of the statehood. Activists of the Union of Poles (the leading Polish national

organization) were members of Belarusian cultural and political organizations.

In the present political discourse "Polishness" is very often associated with "opposition" and "disloyalty" (at least, cultural) to the existing government system.

The level of the inter-national tension between the Poles and other national groups in the region is quite low. However, Poles (or Catholics in general) are often characterized as more "persistent", "enterprising", and "insolent", which is explained by their affiliation with "Western culture" and values. Terms "*Mazur*"[4] or "*Pan*"[5] are often used as a negative characteristic. In their turn, Poles and Catholics typically have a sense of a certain cultural and social superiority: "cleaner houses", "order in the backyard", "neatness", more attention to culture of behavior, speech, dressing, etc. At the same time, they often characterize the Orthodox as "lazy", "religiously passive", "sloppy", etc.

Russians. Russians are the third national group by number. Their influence is especially visible in the cities. Particularly, in Hrodna their community is quite structured. They are to a significantly greater extent inclined to support the state policy and have no problems in realization of their national needs. The level of tension between the Russians and other national groups is quite low, although it is to a certain degree perceptible on the everyday level. Most often Russians are symbolically associated with the Soviet state, the army, retired military officers and non-locals, who "came after the war", sometimes they are said to unjustly dominate in the power structures. "*Katsaps*"[6] and, occasionally, "*Rusaks*" are derogatory nicknames used towards this group.

In small towns Russian identity is a lot weaker. The majority of Russians aspires to quickly integrate into local community and do not demonstrate different self-identification.

Migrants. The number of new migrants in the region is insignificant, and, as a rule, unnoticeable. The only exclusion is Hrodna, which has a certain level of negative and aggressive atti-

[4] The term reflects non-local, proper Polish origin, which in mass consciousness is characterized by some elements of chauvinism and disdain for the "local".

[5] Indicates aspiration for a privileged, higher cultural and social status.

[6] The name indicating relation to Russian culture and/or Orthodoxy. In Belarus the word is used to designate ethnic Russians (primarily, Old Believers). In Poland, as a rule, all Orthodox Christians and Eastern Slavs are called "Katsaps".

tude to "new-comers", "dark-skinned", etc. As a border region, it attracts transit migrants, whose destination are the countries of the Western Europe.

The problem of the Belarusian culture and language

Discrimination and restriction of Belarusian culture is another problem. Since the mid-1990's the authorities perceive the Belarusian language and culture as a sign of "opposition-minded" or negative attitude towards the present political system. Not only the authorities fail to stimulate, but in certain cases they work to suppress the national and cultural activity. The authorities have shut down practically all urban secondary schools with Belarusian as a language of instruction; students have no possibility to receive higher education in Belarusian language; the authorities do not welcome Belarusian language in the public and official spheres.

Since the middle of the nineties the status of Belarusian language and culture has been a subject of political debate, which is still vital. In the majority of secondary schools Belarusian is taught as a second language, it is also used as a language of instruction during classes of Belarusian literature and (sometimes) history of Belarus.

Linguistic Situation

Linguistic situation is very different in the urban and rural areas. In the rural areas the majority of population uses Belarusian or mixed ("simple", "our", "local") language of Belarusian basis and Russian and Polish influence for everyday communication. In the cities Russian language dominates in all national groups. Thus, in Hrodna city Belarusian language in everyday communication is used only by 17% of Belarusians, 2% of Russians, and 16% of Poles (Polish is used only by 5% of Poles). The official sphere is dominated by Russian language (rarely – by Belarusian language, primarily in the sphere of education and culture). In general, the government stimulates spreading of Russian, and exclusion of all other national languages. The majority of the printed editions of the region use Russian or both languages. There is only one newspaper in Polish language — *Glos z nad Niemna*, founded by the Union of Poles (since 2005 the newspaper is controlled by the authorities). Besides that, Polish language is used by the Catholic Church. Usage of the Polish language in public places or on the streets might provoke irritation on the level of everyday communication. (Similar situation with Belarusian language may be observed in Poland).

System of Education

Practically all urban schools have Russian, and rural schools – Belarusian as a language of instruction. There are only two schools with Polish as a language of instruction in Belarus – one in Vaukavysk and one in Hrodna. In other Polish schools Polish is taught either as an obligatory subject or an optional course. Local authorities are known for creation of numerous obstacles for expansion of Belarusian and Polish as languages of instruction.

Both ethnic Poles and Belarusians study in classes with Polish as a language of instruction. There is a similar situation with Polish language as an optional subject. Motivation to learn the language varies from a desire to learn the culture of own (neighboring) nation to prospects of emigration. At present Polish language is not only a language of a national minority but also a language that provides education and employment opportunities. In particular, knowledge of Polish language opens an opportunity to become a student of Polish higher educational institutions.

Religious situation

Generally, about 80% of Belarusian citizens (according to their cultural identification) are Orthodox; about 15% are Catholic. About 1/3 of Catholics are Poles, the rest are Belarusians. The western region of Belarus is noted for a significantly higher piety in comparison with other regions of the country. Not only the majority of Catholic, but also the majority of Orthodox parishes is located there.

In Belarus Orthodox Christianity is represented only by Moscow patriarchy. Efforts to create an autocephalous Orthodox Church are consistently suppressed by the authorities. Similarly, the authorities hamper the development of the Uniate (Greek Catholic) Church. The Orthodox Church uses Church Slavonic and Russian, very rarely – Belarusian – languages in its work. Linguistic (national) policy of the Roman Catholic Church differs depending on the region of the country. Catholic Church uses Belarusian language in big cities, Minsk, in particular. Polish language is used in the West, many priests in this region are Polish citizens.

Catholicism and Orthodoxy are asymmetric in their cultural and religious activity. Catholics are significantly more religious than the Orthodox. Besides that, in case of mixed marriages an Orthodox spouse would noticeably more often adopt Catholicism than vice versa. From the cultural point of view Catholicism is

often associated with "Polishness", and Orthodoxy – with "Russianness". That is why certain typical features and stereotypes about Poles are sometimes extrapolated on all Catholics, and opinions about Russians – on all Orthodox Christians. It is considered that Belarusians can be both Catholic and Orthodox, while Poles are only Catholic, and Russians – only Orthodox.

At present the authorities stimulate the development of the Orthodox Church by providing various privileges, including economic ones. State support of the Orthodox Church gives it a more privileged status comparing with other denominations. In the late 1990's the government provided strong support to various anti-Catholic, mainly publishing and propagandistic, initiatives. Polish priests encountered various obstacles for their service in Belarus.

National minorities and power

All national groups are represented in the bodies of executive and representative power. The system of power is formed on the principles of political loyalty; there is practically no discrimination of any of the national groups.

Sometimes one can observe certain estrangement of national minorities, primarily, Poles, from the Belarusian state. Despite regular declarations of the government about multinational and multi-denominational character of the Belarusian state, in reality the authorities stress its Eastern-Slavic basis with certain anti-Catholic elements. This is typical for political rhetoric of the state, as well as for its educational policy and ideology. Very often not only Polish, but also Belarusian Catholic identity is excluded from the state context.

Some Poles identify themselves with the Polish state and are indifferent in their attitude to the Belarusian statehood. To a certain extent it is based on the remembrances about the 1920's and the 1930's of the 20th century, when Western part of Belarus was part of Poland.

In present circumstances the minorities link main obstacles in realization of their national needs (if there are any) with the actions of the state. In their turn, the authorities are interested in loyalty of the national minorities. This is the reason of the direct interference of the state structures in the activities of the national communities, especially, the Union of Poles of Belarus.

In general, there is no serious confrontation on the national, ethnic, or religious basis in the region. As a rule, peaceful interac-

tion of different groups is noted in Hrodna region. National groups do not record pressure or discrimination during direct interaction with each other.

Affiliation with one of the national groups has little impact in the official relations and everyday life. Nationality symbols are used in conflicts, often to characterize an individual, but not a group. Negative prejudices rarely lead to antagonistic contradictions and almost never take an ideological form. Long life side by side resulted in a quite tolerant culture of national interaction, although that does not exclude prejudices and neighbor conflicts.

Prejudices about mixed marriages are quite limited (mainly, Catholic parents might oppose marriage of their children with the Orthodox).

Bialystok region (Bialystok voivodship, Poland)

There are about 150-200 thousand Orthodox Christians in Bialystok, among them 50 thousand are Belarusians (according to the census of 2002). Other 100-150 thousand determine their national identity as Polish. It is most visible in the big cities: for instance, in Bialystok only 18-20% of the Orthodox Christians consider themselves Belarusian. Generally, about 1/3 of the Orthodox Christians in the region identified themselves as Belarusians.

Public opinion polls and electoral behavior give grounds to claim that about 50-100 thousand of Orthodox Christians have a transitional or mixed (Belarusian—Polish) identity.

At present Orthodox Christians make up less than 10% of population of Bialystok region. They reside mainly in the eastern part of the region, close to the Belarusian border. Bielsk and Hajnowka towns are the main centers of Belarusian culture. The town of Hajnowka (about 22.5 thousand residents) and adjacent districts are the area of compact residence of the Belarusian and Orthodox minority. Hajnowka is one of the centers of Belarusian culture in Poland; Belarusian organizations are represented in the local government bodies, there is a Belarusian gymnasium (high school) and a museum of Belarusian culture is being created. The Orthodox make up 60% of the town population, Belarusians – 26.41% of the population. Belarusians reside compactly in the Eastern part of Hajnowka district, they make up an absolute majority in a number of communities (in particular, in Czyzy and Dubiczy-Carkowne

over 80% of residents are Belarusian). Bialystok is an organizational center of the Belarusian movement; central bodies of the majority of the Belarusian organizations are located there.

In general, Bialystok region is distinguished by stable religious and national traditions and certain conservatism. At the same time, the region is one of the poorest in the country.

Belarusian minority

Despite its fewness (50 thousand with national and additional 50-100 thousand with weakened and mixed identity), the Belarusian diaspora is quite developed both in the cultural and political spheres. Belarusians are the only national minority in Poland, which created a system anti-communist opposition movement in the 1980's. At present Belarusians actively participate in elections and other political campaigns; there is a Belarusian Election Committee. Besides that, there are literary, historical, folklore societies; there are irregular magazines and monographs published in Belarusian language. The diaspora also publishes a *Niwa* weekly in Belarusian language, airs radio and television programs, etc.[7] Bialystok and Warsaw Universities have Belarusian departments. Belarusian diaspora in Bialystok region has a special significance for Belarusian culture; it is actively included in the modern cultural and social processes in Belarus.

Linguistic situation

Belarusians mainly use local dialects of the Belarusian language in their everyday communication. As a rule, Belarusian language is used for communication inside the national community. The language for official communication and communication with visitors is Polish. National organizations use Belarusian language in their promotion campaigns during elections. Polish language dominates in the official sphere.

Religious institutes of the region rarely use Belarusian language. Catholic Church uses only Polish language; Orthodox Church uses Church Slavonic, Russian, and, very rarely – Belarusian languages. At present hierarchs of the Polish Orthodox Church promote gradual introduction of the Polish language as the basic one. Polish Orthodox Church shows practically no support to the Belarusian national movement.

[7] Polish communist authorities allowed creation of the Belarusian Civic and Culture Society and Niwa newspaper in the 1950'.

Ethno cultural conceptions and stereotypes

As a rule, Poles have a stereotype of Belarusians as of badly-organized, unclear community without a cultural tradition. In other words, in general, Belarusians are considered to be "worse" people, although often Belarusians do not stand out in the crowd.

Negative characteristics of the Orthodox and Belarusian minority are reinforced by genealogical myths. There are false common beliefs about movement of the Orthodox population to the region by the authorities of the Russian Empire, and about russification of Poles at that time. Besides that, Orthodox Christians and Belarusians were identified with the "communists", "Soviets", "Russians", etc. Some of the stereotypes keep their meaning at present.[8] The word "*katsaps*", common for all the Orthodox and Eastern Slavs, is quite often used as a negative nickname for Belarusians.

At the same time, violent assimilation, the "siege" (settlement of Polish colonists), discrimination and repression against Belarusian organizations and national activists still linger in the minds of the local Belarusians. In the period after the World War II there were several groups active in the region whose goal was to violently oust Belarusians from the region. They burnt villages and killed people. In the 1980's there were registered threats against Orthodox Christians and attempts to burn Orthodox churches. Remembrances of the events of the past have their impact on the perception of the international and religious relations at present.

Education System

Polish legislation entitles national minorities to the right to receive education in their mother tongue. The system of national education for Belarusians in Poland is represented by a network of about 40 schools which teach the courses of Belarusian language, Basics of the Belarusian Culture, Belarusian Literature and History. Other subjects are taught in Polish.

Belarusian Minority and Power

Belarusians and Orthodox Christians of Bialystok region are the voters of the left-wing political parties. It is mainly grounded

[8] It should be pointed out that because of discrimination and quite poor economic situation, the region had a very strong left-wing movement in the period between the wars. As a result, representatives of the Belarusian and Orthodox minority took quite an active part in consolidation of power of the Polish People's Republic after the World War II.

on the high degree of clericalism of the right-wing part of the political spectrum of the region. [9]

Belarusians are represented in the local self-governments on the level of *gmina* (community, the smallest administrative unit); there are Belarusian representatives in the municipal representative and executive bodies.

Belarusian political movement is represented by the Belarusian Election Committee, which also has its representatives in the structures of power.

In general, there is a certain tension between religious and national groups in the region. The level of tension does not exclude conflicts and discrimination on everyday and official levels. Quite many political organizations of the region consider Belarusian and Orthodox elements alien and do not integrate them in the local cultural and social context. The level of anti-Orthodox sentiments in the region is significantly higher than in Poland in general. However, at present the confrontation does not take open forms.

Real political confrontation is observed only in the areas were the size of Belarusian (Orthodox) and Polish population is approximately equal. Primarily, it applies to employment policy in the local power structures and distribution of financial resources. It is also reflected in the activity of radical political groups.

Conflict of the Belarusian Authorities with the Union of Poles of Belarus

Brief information: The Union of Poles of Belarus (• wi¹zek Polakyw na Bia³orusi) was founded in 1986 as a national and cultural association of the Polish national minority in Belarus. Until recently it was the leading organization of Poles in Belarus.

Similar to other national organizations, the mission of the Union of Poles of Belarus (UPB) was to preserve Polish language and culture, to develop education system and to help the Polish community satisfy its cultural needs. Since the early 1990's the

[9] In the 1980's the Orthodox Christians of Bialystok region did not really participate in the Solidarnosc (Solidarity) movement. Here Solidarity had a clearly defined Catholic nature. There were wide-spread rumors about possible repression against all non-Catholics if Solidarity came to power. In their turn, Catholics were quite active. It is enough to remind the readers that Jerzy Popieluszka, famous Catholic priest and defender of human rights, who was tormented to death by the special services, comes from this region.

UPB leadership promoted cooperation between Belarus and Poland, supported democratic changes and development of the civic society in Belarus. Tadeusz Gawin was elected chairperson of the organization. UPB established contacts with some pro-democratic organizations. Such cooperation acquired even greater importance after the constitutional crisis of 1996 and growth of authoritarian tendencies in Belarus.

Since the late 1990's the Belarusian government has been trying to take political control over the organization of the Polish national minority. As a result, new leadership was elected at the organization's convention in 2000. Tadeusz Kruczkowski became the new chairperson of UPB. The next convention in March 2005 elects new Board, with Anzhelika Borys as a chairperson. However, the Belarusian authorities refused to recognize change of leadership in the Union. The government insisted on a repeated convention. The Board, elected in March and supported by Polish government, did not agree to call another convention. The situation provoked a conflict of the Belarusian authorities with a part of Polish national minority and led to significant deterioration of relations between Belarus and Poland.

Election of new governing bodies: According to the Statute, the UPB convention was to be held in November 2004. However, the Union chairman T. Kruczkowski ruled to postpone it till the spring of 2005. The Belarusian authorities began to exert pressure on the Union activists and potential delegates during preparation of the convention. (In particular, two most active critics of the Union's policies under Kruczkowski were arrested and jailed right before the convention). Nevertheless, on March 12-13 the delegates of the VI convention elected the new leadership of the organization by secret ballot. Anzhelika Borys was elected chairperson.

The Ministry of Justice took the side of T. Kruczkowski and refused to recognize the results of the convention held on March 12-13 in Hrodna. The Ministry suggested that a repeated convention of the organization should be held. In their turn, the new leadership opposed the proposal, insisting that the Ministry's claims were ungrounded and politically-motivated. Despite intervention of the Polish authorities and opinion of the significant part of the Union members, in May 2005 the Ministry of Justice again refused to recognize the convention and the new leadership elected in March. The Belarusian authorities claimed the convention delegates had

been elected with violations of the UPB Statute, and that could have effect on the voting results. Correspondingly, the Ministry of Justice ruled to restore the rights of the previous chairperson Kruczkowski and other members of his team.

The conflict continued in the summer of 2005. The previous leadership of the Union, assisted by the local executive authorities, exerted pressure on the regional structures of the Union and ousted the new leadership from the Union offices. The story of the OMON storming the office in Hrodna has had great publicity. The special police (OMON) stormed the building of the Union of Poles on July 27 and arrested 20 Union activists who kept round-the-clock vigil there.

The repeated convention of the Union was held on July 26-27 in Vaukavysk. It was prepared and held mainly by the state executive authorities. The convention was attended by the Minister of Culture and chairperson of the Committee for religious and national affairs.

In order to prevent protest actions the police arrested 5 most active members of the Union right before the convention. Besides that, the Union ex-chairperson Tadeusz Gawin was in detention as well. Generally, the law-enforcement bodies managed to prevent about 50 people (disloyal activists of the Union, reporters, and representatives of Belarusian pro-democratic organizations) from attending the convention.

At the same time, numerous violations in nomination of the delegates to the repeated convention were reported. According to the Union activists and mass media, in the majority of cases the local conferences nominating the delegates lacked the necessary quorum (50%); representatives of the ideological “vertical” took active part in the conferences; the lists of the convention delegates were formed by local authorities. Some big organizations (Minsk city Union, for example) refused to participate in the repeated convention, recognizing the authority of the leadership elected in March. Despite that, the Ministry of Justice had no remarks about the course of the convention and recognized it legitimate. Jozef Lucznik became the new chairperson.

In fact, in March – August 2005 the structures of the Union split over the issue of leadership. Some Union members submitted to the decision of the authorities and expressed their readiness to cooperate with the leadership, elected in August. Other members did not recognize the results of the repeated convention and had to

go through various forms of administrative pressure in 2005. Since the fall of 2005 sessions of the Union Board headed by Anzhelika Borys have been held outside the country.

Aggravation of Belarusian-Polish relations. The conflict between the Belarusian authorities and the Union of Poles of Belarus has complicated the relations between Belarus and Poland. Since the early 1990's Poland is the main donor of the Polish diaspora (including property matters). The Union of Poland has had a very close cooperation with the Polish government. After the Union convention in March 2005, representatives of Poland in Belarus recognized the new leadership of the Union and came out in its support. The following attempts of the authorities to interfere in the affairs of the Union were considered an unfriendly act towards Poland and violation of rights of the Polish national minority. In the summer Poland even recalled its ambassador for consultations because of the conflict around the Union. Three Polish and three Belarusian diplomats were expelled in the context of the conflict. Besides that, the Belarusian government accused Poland of financing and supporting "subversive" activities in Belarus. In response, Poland produced a list of individuals who would be denied entry to Poland for three years. The people on the list: T. Kruczkowski, the minister of justice, a number of KGB agents and representatives of other state bodies were involved in organized pressure on the Union. In their turn, the Belarusian authorities denied entry to Belarus to members of the European Parliament. The Polish ambassador returned to Minsk only in early October 2005.

The Polish government consistently supported the Union leadership elected in March. The support was expressed at the highest level, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the government (in November 2005 A. Borys met with the Polish Prime Minister). Polish politicians (Senate deputy speaker J. Danielak, in particular) considered the official Union of Poles a controlled organization failing to meet the interests of the Belarusian Poles.

In Belarus the conflict was supported by a loud anti-Polish campaign in the state-owned mass media and public pressure on the activists of the Polish movement. In particular, in June 2005 *Vo Slavu Rodiny* newspaper published materials fomenting national hostility. However, the military prosecutor's office refused to

instigate the proceedings. The state-owned TV channels demonstrated propaganda films such as "Agent 590" or "Who put out a contract on the Union of Poles?"

Pressure on the activists of the Polish movement. The Union activists disloyal to the government-controlled leadership reported about numerous facts of pressure during 2005. They went through a negative information campaign, administrative persecution and threats of criminal prosecution. In particular, the Belarusian authorities instigated proceedings on misappropriation of the resources of the Union of Poles. Activists of the Union, including A. Borys and T. Gawin, were repeatedly interrogated as witnesses. The Polish community considered that criminal case an attempt of psychological pressure on the Union members disloyal to the authorities. Four activists of the Union faced criminal charges of coercion (for attempting to conduct a revision of the affairs of Shchuchyn branch of the Union). In August of 2005 Tadeusz Gawin, founder of the Union of Poles, served 30 days in jail. In April 2005 criminal proceedings against activities of the Union were instigated in Brest. Since August 2005 the leaders of the Polish minority have been encountering numerous problems while crossing the border.

New amendments to the Criminal Code in 2006 aggravated the situation for the part of the Polish community. The amendments provide for criminal responsibility for participation in activities of unregistered organizations. In fact, that puts any activity carried out by the unrecognized part of the Union under threat of criminal persecution.

The conflict of the Belarusian authorities and the Union of Poles is politically-motivated. The authorities violate the rights of the Polish minority for freedom of association. The last convention of the Union of Poles was held under absolute control, pressure and manipulation by the authorities.

The situation around the Union of Poles is a power conflict. It is based on the desire of the Belarusian authorities to control the public and cultural life of the Polish minority. However, the actions of the authorities have not led to direct discrimination and pressure on ordinary members of the Polish national community.

Trial over Editorial Board of *Niwa* Weekly
(newspaper of Belarusians in Poland)

In general, during the past years the conditions for development of Belarusian national minority were quite favorable. Nevertheless, the situation deteriorated in conjunction with the case of *Niwa* weekly. Criminal prosecution lasted since 2003 to 2006 and resulted in acquittal of the leaders of the Belarusian minority. However, it caused damage to the image and cultural activity of Belarusian organizations in Poland. Moreover, the criminal charges impaired the political activity of Belarusians on the regional level.

In the period from May to October of 2003 the Supreme Control Chamber (NIK) of Poland checked the usage of government resources in the sphere of culture in 2001-2003. Over 100 entities, including *Niwa* weekly, were examined all over the country. In general, the Control Chamber gave a negative assessment of the work of the Ministry of Culture in the sphere of distribution of grant money. The Chamber also reported about certain violations in the work of *Niwa*. Essentially, the violations were related to legislation on book-keeping. The Chamber did not reveal any embezzlement or misappropriation. In the fall of 2003 representatives of NIK in Bialystok inform the prosecutor's office about possible elements of a crime in the actions of the Editorial Board of the weekly. In October 2003 the prosecutor's office starts an investigation against 11 members of the editorial board of the newspaper, including influential figures in the Belarusian minority Jauhen Wapa, Jauhen Miranovicz, Michas Andrasiuk, Jury Chmialeuski. The police interrogated the activists of the Belarusian community, took their fingerprints, and carried out other investigative actions. In one year (September 27, 2004) the prosecutor's office pressed charges against 11 publishers of the weekly. Bialystok-South Chief Prosecutor held a press conference. The process drew much attention of the mass media. Human rights organizations of Belarus and representatives of the democratic movement expressed their concern about the gist of the charges. Gradually the situation received international attention. Besides that, till the end of 2004 over 15 Belarusian organizations in Poland expressed their support to *Niwa* weekly.

Unfortunately, there were many negative statements in the press (first articles appear in the summer of 2003), and on TV in

2003-2004. Among other things, the mass media claim that members of the editorial board are charged with theft and misappropriation of the Ministry's of Culture resources. Official statements of the prosecutor's office representatives, about the activists facing 8 years of imprisonment, also had their negative effect.

The trial over *Niwa* publishers began in February 2006. At that time the relations between Poland and Belarus had deteriorated because of the pressure of the Belarusian government on the Polish minority organizations. However, it had practically no impact on the trial. The verdict was made on May 16, 2006. All 11 members of the Editorial board were found not guilty. At the same time, the court acknowledged a number of violations of the financial legislation made by the chief accountant and chairperson of the editorial board. Simultaneously, the court recognized that meeting all norms of the law would make it impossible for the weekly to come out regularly. Belarusian associations of Poland and human rights organizations of Belarus were quite satisfied with the verdict.

The majority of representatives of the Belarusian community believe that the campaign of criminal persecution of the *Niwa* publishers was organized and supported on the regional level. Most likely, prosecution was supported by a number of political organizations of Bialystok region, as well as by personal negative attitude of some law-enforcement officials towards representatives of national minorities.

The Mission to Neighboring Areas of Poland and Belarus, July 3-9, 2004

Mission Background

Belarus-Poland borderland is remarkable for its multi-national and multi-denominational population, divided by state borders. That is why it is so important to determine the prospects of good-neighborly relations and cooperation between the peoples of the two countries.

National minorities on both sides of the border occasionally experience unfriendly treatment by the state authorities. Both in the past and the present the rights of national minorities have been violated by both states.

Enlargement of the European Union led to new division. It led to new problems of communication between the diasporas, threats of assimilation, and difficulties of economic and cultural cooperation in the border areas.

The mission was to reveal a conflict potential in the region, evaluate the level of the international relations, and to inform the public and the official structures about the situation with the rights of minorities and the problems of inter-national and inter-denominational relations in the region.

Our trans-border mission was planned in advance and carried out on the territory of 2 countries.

The decision to go on a mission was made at the general meeting of the Working Group of CIS NGOs.

Goals, objectives and participants of the mission

The goal of the mission was to reveal a conflict potential in the region and to work out recommendations for improvement of the situation with the rights of national minorities; to determine prospects of preservation of the national culture and identity, and to analyze the experience of national and cultural interaction in the region.

Mission objectives:

1) to collect information about the geo-political situation:

– structure of the population, identity and cultural traditions;

– attitude to political situation and to actions of the state bodies;

– possible facts of violation of rights of national minorities by the authorities;

– possible practice of xenophobia and distrust on the everyday life level;

2) to study the state of relations between religious denominations;

3) to study the consequences and the prospects of the EU enlargement.

Mission participants: Igor Savin ("Dialog" NGO, Kazakhstan), Andrei Kazakevich (political scientist, Belarus), Palina Stsepanenka (coordinator of WG sub-network for Western-CIS, Human Rights Center "Viasna").

Information Sources

Personal interviews with activists of the national movement, NGOs representatives, key figures of culture, officials, etc. have become our main source of information. Besides that, the mission

participants have carried out a situation analysis of local mass media and editions published by the national minorities.

The mission was preceded by general study of the national, denominational, cultural, political and economical situation in the region.

Brief description of the situation in the region

The population of Hrodna region (oblast) in Belarus is about 1, 180 thousand people. Among them (according to the census in 1999) about 62% are Belarusians, 10% — Russians, and 24.8% — Poles. Description of the national situation in the region is somewhat complicated on account of russification of the part of Belarusians and Poles, as well as the weakness of Polish national identity in the region. Thus, about 65% of the Poles in the region say their native language is Belarusian, 16% — Russian, and only 18% — Polish. In everyday communication Belarusian language is used by 61% of Belarusians, 58% of Poles and 8% of Russians. Besides that, in everyday communication 36% of Poles use only Russian language, and about 6% of them use only Polish language. Roman Catholic Church plays an important role in maintenance of Polish identity (Poles make up about 1/3 of all Catholics in Belarus).

National and cultural situation in the region. According to statistical data as well as special studies, national identity of Poles of the region is quite blurred. Significant number of Belarusian Poles has a two-level identity, which includes both Polish — interest to Polish language, culture, origin, — and Belarusian national elements: acceptance of independence and sovereignty of Belarus, feeling of historical commonality, and respect to culture.

The level of emotional tension between the Poles and other national groups of the region is quite low, although the Poles (or Catholics in general) are, as a rule, characterized as more "bullheaded", "enterprising", and "insolent", which is explained by the fact that they belong to "Western culture" and values.

Russians are the third national group by size. Their influence is visible in big cities, Hrodna, in particular, where their community is well developed and structured. They are to a greater extent inclined to support the policies of the state and experience no problems in realization of their needs. The level of tension between the Russians and other national groups is low, although it is perceptible in everyday life. In small towns the Russian national group is visibly weaker in its identity and activity.

The number of new migrants in the region is insignificant and, as a rule, it is unnoticeable. Hrodna is an exception, where one can observe a certain level of negative and aggressive attitude to “newcomers”, the “dark-skinned”, etc. Transit migration is also a characteristic feature for the borderland.

The problem of discrimination and limitation of Belarusian culture is another big issue. From the mid-1990’s the authorities consider the Belarusian language and culture as a sign of “opposition” and “negative attitude” to the current political system. The authorities do not stimulate and, in certain cases, suppress manifestations of Belarusian national and cultural activity. The authorities have shut down practically all urban schools with Belarusian as a language of teaching. There is no opportunity to receive higher education in Belarusian language. The authorities do not approve of usage of Belarusian language in public and official spheres.

The linguistic situation is significantly different in urban and rural areas. While in rural areas the majority of people use Belarusian or mixed (“simple”, “our”, “local”) language with Belarusian basis and influence of Russian and Polish; in urban areas usage of Russian language dominates among all national groups. Thus, in Hrodna city only 17% of Belarusians, 2% of Russians, and 16% of the Poles use Belarusian language at home (Polish language is used only by about 5% of Poles).

Russian language is predominantly used in the official sphere. Belarusian language is used more rarely, mainly, in the sphere of culture and education. In general, the state stimulates spreading of the Russian language and exclusion of other national languages.

Practically all urban schools have Russian as a language of teaching, while in rural areas students receive education in Belarusian language. There are two schools with Polish as a language of instruction in Belarus – in Hrodna and Vaukavysk (both Hrodna region). In other schools Polish is taught as a subject, either obligatory or optional. The local authorities create various obstacles for expansion of Polish and Belarusian language education.

In the whole country the percentage of Orthodox Christians (according to cultural identification) makes up about 80%, the percentage of Catholics is about 15%. Poles make up about 1/3 of Catholics. The rest are Belarusians. Western regions of Belarus are characterized by deeper religiousness in comparison with the other parts of the country. Not only the majority of Catholic, but also

the majority of Orthodox parishes is located here. Orthodox Christianity in Belarus is represented only by Moscow patriarchy. All attempts to create an Autocephalic Belarusian Orthodox Church are consistently blocked by the authorities. The authorities also impede the development of (Greek Catholic) Uniate Church.

As for cultural and religious activity, there is an asymmetry between Catholic and Orthodox Churches in Belarus. Catholics are significantly more religious than Orthodox Christians. Besides that, in mixed marriages an Orthodox spouse is a lot more likely to adopt Catholicism than vice versa. From the cultural point of view Catholicism is often linked to being "Polish", while Orthodoxy is linked to being "Russian". That is why certain stereotypical perceptions of Poles are partially transferred to all Catholics, while stereotypical perceptions of Russians are transferred to all people of Orthodox beliefs.

Members of all national groups are represented in the bodies of legislative and executive power. The system of power is formed on the principles of loyalty towards the government; there is practically no discrimination against certain national groups.

From time to time it becomes apparent that there is a certain alienation of national minorities (primarily, Poles) from the Belarusian state. Despite continuous declarations that Belarus is a multi-national and multi-denominational state, in reality the authorities stress its Eastern-Slavic basis, with some anti-catholic elements in their arguments.

This is typical for political rhetoric of the authorities, educational policies and ideology. Not only Polish, but also Belarusian Catholic identity is excluded from the state context.

In present conditions the national minorities connect the main obstacles (if there are such) with the actions of the authorities. In their turn, the authorities are interested in loyalty of the national minorities. That is why occasionally they interfere in the activity of their organizations, Union of Poles of Belarus, in particular.

National origin of an individual has little impact on his or her relations in the official or everyday life. Symbols of national identity are usually used in conflicts to characterize not a group but an individual. Negative prejudices rarely lead to antagonistic contradictions and practically never take an ideological form. Long history of living together led to tolerant culture of national interaction, although that does not exclude prejudices and everyday conflicts.

In Bialystok region (Republic of Poland) there are about 150-200 thousand Orthodox Christians, among them 50 thousand are Belarusians (according to the census in 2003). The other 100-150 thousand define their national identity as Polish. This is most evident in big cities, for example, in Bialystok only 18-20% of Orthodox Christians consider themselves Belarusian. All-in-all, 1/3 of Orthodox Christians in the region claimed their Belarusian ethnic origin.

Public opinion polls and analysis of electoral behavior suggest that about 50-100 thousand Orthodox Christians have a transit or mixed (Belarusian-Polish) identity.

At present Orthodox Christians make up less than 10% of Bialystok region. They reside primarily in Eastern districts adjacent to the Belarusian border. Despite its small size (50 thousand with national identity and 50-100 thousand people with weakened or mixed identity) the Belarusian diaspora is quite developed both in cultural and political aspects. Belarusians are the only national minority who managed to create a structured anti-Communist opposition in the 1980'. At present Belarusians take an active part in elections, with their Belarusian Electoral Committee and a political party. Besides that, there is a network of literary, historical and folk clubs; magazines and monographs are published in Belarusian language. There is a Belarusian-language newspaper *Niwa*, and Belarusian language radio-programs. Bialystok University has a Chair of Belarusian Philology. Belarusian Diaspora in Bialystok region bears special significance for Belarusian culture in general. It is included in the processes of modern culture in Belarus.

In their everyday communication Belarusians mainly use local dialects of Belarusian language. Belarusian language is used for communication inside the community, while Polish language is used for communication on the official level or with visitors. National organizations use Belarusian language in election campaigns. Polish language dominates in all sectors of the official sphere.

Religious institutions of the region do not use Belarusian language. Catholic Church uses Polish, while Orthodox Church – Russian or Church Slavonic languages. Currently hierarchs of Polish Orthodox Church are discussing gradual introduction of Polish language as the basic one.

In their stereotypes Poles consider Belarusians a poorly-organized, blurred community with no cultural tradition. Thus, in general, Belarusians are considered "worse" people. Negative

characteristics of Orthodox and Belarusian minorities are supplemented with genealogical myths. On the level of everyday life a false opinion that Orthodox Christians were moved to Bialystok region by the authorities of the Russian Empire is promoted. Besides that, Orthodox Christians and Belarusians were identified with "communists", "Soviets", "Russians", etc.

In their turn, Belarusians preserve memories about violent assimilation, "siege policy" (purposeful resettlement of Poles to Eastern territories of Poland in 1920' and 1030'), and discrimination and repression against Belarusian organizations.

Polish legislation gives national minorities the right to receive education in their native language. The system of national education for Belarusians of Poland is represented by approximately 40 schools which teach Belarusian language as a subject, as well as offer introductory courses of Belarusian culture, literature and history. All other subjects are taught in Polish.

Belarusians and Orthodox Christians of Bialystok region typically vote for left-wing political parties. This is mainly explained by the high degree of clericalization of the right-wing political spectrum of the region. Belarusians are represented in the bodies of executive power, they are active members of political parties. Belarusians are represented in power on the level of *gmina* (the smallest administrative unit — community), they have representatives in the local councils, as well as town and village mayors.

The Belarusian movement is represented by the Belarusian Electoral Committee, which also has its representatives in the bodies of power.

The EU enlargement, and, especially, Poland joining the EU, have and will make significant impact on the border districts of Belarus both in the economic and cultural aspects. On one hand, the new border opens new prospects, on the other hand, it holds the risk of economic, political, and cultural division and alienation.

The EU enlargement was accompanied by change of border-crossing rules, introduction of visa regime, change of trade regulations. In July 2004 Belarus introduced new rules for import of food products, household appliances, and some other goods from neighboring countries. That has attacked commerce and cross-border business in general.

For Belarusian border districts the EU is an area of new opportunities. As a rule it is stressed that the opportunities are not used through the fault of Minsk or Brussels. Most often an image of a

"bridge" between Europe and big Russian/Eastern market is used to describe relations between the EU and Belarus. The notion of the "iron curtain" or the "new iron curtain" is used to describe the threats connected with the enlargement, again referring to the historical experience of the USSR.

Traditionally the European Union is a symbol of prosperity, economic growth, wealth, political balance, open borders, single currency, and cultural progress. Another feature attributed to the EU is national diversity although some people engaged in cultural activity feel certain anxiety about possible obliteration of cultural differences and assimilation.

In general, the image of the EU is positive. However, that does not automatically lead to positive expectations of its enlargement. The EU is more and more perceived as some "other', "alien" area, closed for strangers, a corporation, or a club for the elite.

Besides the "club", the EU is often described by the metaphor of the new "empire". The EU as an empire may be perceived in the negative sense – expansion, subordination, exploitation. However, more often usage of the notion of empire is connected with awareness of some huge single area appearing on the Western border. Local observers perceive it as a huge single area with no clear structure and vector of development.

In the short term period the most visible consequences of the EU enlargement were changes in the rules of border-crossing and limitation of commerce. The border has objectively become more closed, it is more and more often compared with the border during the Soviet times, which divided two different worlds from each other. For residents of the border region, especially older ones, this is primarily connected with the necessity to receive visas. There were especially high inconveniences immediately after introduction of visas because of long lines and high visa cost. At present moment the situation is not that critical. The EU enlargement has made a significant impact on commerce and cross-border business in general, which involved from 20 to 50% of able-bodied citizens in different districts.

In general, Belarusians in Bialystok region did not support the idea of the EU enlargement. Such moods are typical for the whole Eastern Poland. As a rule, negative attitude to the EU is connected with fear of competition and bankruptcy of small farms, as well as the fear of blurring of religiousness and cultural identity.

Practical events carried out by the mission

July 3-5, 2004 study of Hrodna region

Our group met:

- with representatives of national minorities;
- with leaders and members of non-governmental organizations in cultural sphere;
- mass media representatives;
- representatives of the local self-government bodies.

The meetings were held in the following locations: Hrodna city, Vaukavysk city, Vialikaya Berastavitsa town, Svislach town, Lunna village (Masty district).

During the study of Hrodna region we have interviewed:

Mikola Markevich, editor of the *Den* independent newspaper, head of Hrodna branch of Belarusian Language Society, former member of the Supreme Soviet of Belarus (1990 — 1995), editor of the *Pahonia* newspaper shut down by the authorities, Hrodna city;

Pavel Mazheika, reporter of *Den* newspaper, reporter of *Pahonia* newspaper banned in 2001, Hrodna;

Viktar Sazonau, member of Board of Hrodna branch of Lew Sapeha Foundation, Hrodna;

Aleh Ramashkevich, member of Berastavitsa city council;

Anatoly Valiuk, activist of the unregistered NGO "Kalinouski Brothers' Society", Svislach;

Miraslava Valiuk, student of Polish-language school, Svislach;

Henadz Radzetski, teacher, activist of the unregistered NGO "Kalinouski Brothers' Society", Svislach;

Mikola Aksamit, chair of *Aslona* human rights organization, MP in 1990-1995, Vaukavysk;

Lavon Karpovich, administrator of the optional Polish language course in secondary school, Lunna village;

Algimantas Dirgicius, chairperson of *Tevine* (Fatherland), association of Lithuanians of Hrodna region;

Feliks Gawin, private entrepreneur, Hrodna;

Valery Zadalya, jouornalist, one of the leaders of the Belarusian Language Society, Hrodna;

Stanislau Senkevich, chairperson of "Polska Szkolna Macierz na Bialorusi" NGO, Hrodna;

Barbara Fustochenko, executive secretary of "Polska Szkolna Macierz na Bialorusi" NGO, Hrodna;

Uladzimir Khilmanovich, chairperson of Hrodna branch of Lew Sapeha Foundation, Hrodna.

Research of Bialystok region, **July 6-9, 2004**

We met with:

- representatives of the local bodies of administration and self-governance;
- activists of the national and religious organizations;
- activists of NGOs

The meetings were carried out in Bialystok, Bielsk Podlaski, and Hajnowka.

During the research of Bialystok region we have interviewed:

Marcin Rêbacz, chief of the bureau for public relations at the office of the President of Bialystok city, Bialystok;

Jauhen Wapa, editor-in-chief of *Niwa* newspaper for Belarusians, Bialystok;

Vital Luba, deputy editor-in-chief of *Niwa* newspaper for Belarusians, Bialystok;

Aleh Latyszonak, member of Chair of Belarusian Culture of Bialystok University, chairperson of Belarusian Historical Society, member of the Board of the Belarusian Union in Poland, Bialystok;

Piotr Bazko, vice-head of Bielsk district (povet), Bielsk Podlaski

Jan Czykwin, Belarusian poet, writer, translator, head of Belavezha literary society, PhD, professor, Bielsk Podlaski

Halina Twaranowicz, poet, literary critic, member of Chair of Belarusian Culture of Bialystok University, Bielsk Podlaski;

Michas Andrasiuk, member of Povet (district) council, chairperson of the board of Belarusian Self-Governance Forum in Poland, Hajnowka;

Anatol Ochreciuk, mayor, Hajnowka;

Mikola Wauraniuk, editor of Belarusian programs of the Polish Television, Hajnowka.

Mission Outcomes and Conclusions

Mission outcomes

Pavel Mazheika

...This (EU expansion) may be considered as a real “iron curtain”. There is statistics that in the 1990’s up to 90% of people in the region were earning their living from cross-border contacts and commerce.

Mikola Markevich

...It seems the EU is more open for us than we are for the EU.

Henadz Radzetski

... Sometimes the Belarusians themselves seem to feel as a national minority here.

Aleh Ramashkevich

...*the most oppressed national minority in Belarus are Belarusians. This is a joke, but it has a sad part of the truth.*

Henadz Radzetski

...now this border (with Poland) is the same for us as it was during the Soviet times. Here is the end of the world for me. I was there several times. It was easier to cross the border before.

Lavon Karpovich

...*We don't think that there is some empire across the EU border*

Feliks Gawin

...I think that appearance of the EU border did not really affect our life. I haven't noticed any drastic changes. Visas were introduced a year ago.

Barbara Fustochenko

...according to the census done in the conditions of the Soviet Union, there were 300 thousand Poles in Hrodna region in 1989. There were the total of 400 thousand Poles in Belarus. At that time 13% of the people said Polish was their mother tongue. Although, I don't believe in census numbers, because these are the "convenient" numbers.

Jauhen Wapa

... Belarusians in Bialystok region are Euro-skeptics. That's because from our life experience we know: if they give us something they will surely take something from us later. Very little percentage of Belarusians voted at the referendum. Only 9-15% voted at the election to the European parliament. This is a poor peasant region, and people do not believe promises.

Opinions on the conflict potential and probability of exacerbation of the situation

Mikola Markevich

...In my opinion, there have never been any global conflicts in the sphere of everyday life in Hrodna region. The echoes of the past times sometimes have their effect on the elderly people.

Mikola Markevich

... I know the cases when a Catholic priest would die in a village and there was no one to baptize the children. Then the whole village would go to an Orthodox church.

Aleh Ramashkevich

… Our "shuttle traders" (people who earn their living on small cross-border trade) are afraid and suspicious of this process (the EU enlargement). They are afraid of visas and extra-duties they would have to pay. But I would say that recently they are more afraid of the Belarusian government, not European authorities

Mikola Aksamit

… sometimes Poles are called "Mazurs", but it mostly depends on the personality of a person, not his or her ethnic origin. It does not create any global problems.

Feliks Gawin

… We don't have any conflicts. Because a typical Belarusian does not know either the Belarusian history, or the Belarusian language… Why would they be in conflict? This is not absence of ideology. One can see how rapidly the authorities reduced the number of schools with Belarusian as the language of teaching after 1994. There are people who do not like Poles, there are some who do not like Jews, but these are rare cases.

Valery Zadalya

…there were no facts of persecution of any national groups here. But some people have such opinions. Recently a nationalistic web-site appeared in Belarus, which is dedicated to the relations between the "whites" and the "blacks". The web-site creators provoke the readers against all "non-whites".

Jauhen Wapa

…It has always been like that. This is really the spot where civilizations collide. This is the place where two huge tectonic movements clash. In the frames of Christianity these are Catholic and Orthodox denominations. When two such huge plates knock and rub against each other, there is always some outcome, something is happening.

Aleh Latyszonak

… I think there are no visible negative or positive stereotypes here. Belarusians sometimes say about the Poles that they show off too much.

Vital Luba

…Besides that, here, in the East of Poland, there are very strong anti-Russian, anti-Orthodox moods, which also reflect on the Belarusians.

Marcin Rêmbacz

…Now the conflicts aggravate in the regions where the forces are equal. In Bialystok Belarusians are the minority, that's why

they behave calmly. In other places they are the majority, that's where the Poles are calm. In Bielsk, which has the balance of both forces, the situation might lead to serious conflicts.

Conflict zones and the subject of contradiction in the region

Mikola Markevich

...When Lukashenka came to power, there were 75% of Belarusian schools in Hrodna. At present moment there are none. All schools are Russian, and one school is Polish.

Viktar Sazonau

...We are observing the tragedy of disappearance of Belarusian culture and Belarusian language. That makes the whole civilization poorer.

Aleh Ramashkevich

... there is a certain sense of confrontation. The fact is that the national minority does not bear such a responsibility for the situation in the country as the native population, Belarusians. We are bearing all the responsibility, and they are dealing exclusively with their own issues. There is idle gossip born out of that ground.

...We are speaking about violation of our right to deal with our own Belarusian culture, our own language. We do not have an opportunity to do that.

Mikola Aksamit

...Generally speaking, Polish and Belarusian communities are co-existing peacefully. There are absolutely no conflicts on that ground.

Stanislau Senkevich

...There was a very unpleasant incident during the last census in 1999. Interviewers did not ask people about their native language. Instead, they asked what language they speak. These are different things.

Barbara Fustochenko

Here you go – there is the reason for conflict. Why would a person who came moved here tell me what language I should speak?

I'd say local people are pretty loyal. The people are used to each other. There are mixed marriages. But sometimes we receive anonymous postcards "congratulating" us with September 17[10]*.*

[10] On 17 September 1939 the Red Army crossed the Polish border in order to "liberate" the Belarusians and Ukrainians from the Polish "yoke" thus helping the Nazi Germany to defeat Poland in the Second World War.

We consider that day a knife stuck in the heart of Poland. Such things become reasons for conflicts.

Jauhen Wapa

…Some people tell us that we, Belarusians, were moved here by the Russian Czar. They tell us we are not indigene people here. One can hear that quite often from the Poles. They say, there are no Belarusians at all. There are just russified Poles. This is absurd. There were even articles in newspapers published about that.

…As long ago as in 1923 the Polish authorities declared Bialystok region had always been populated by the Polish people. They shut down all Belarusian schools and prohibited teaching Belarusian language.

…In the beginning of the nineties, when right-wing parties won the election, they "kicked out" all Belarusians from self-governance bodies. Then they boasted that there are no Belarusians, no Orthodox people on the staff of the city administration. That is how it was. Now the situation is changing.

We have nicknames for each other. They call us "Katsaps", we call them "Lachs". These words are not very offensive. There were incidents in the 1980's, when Orthodox churches were set on fire. The question about the role of the authorities and state agencies in that remains unanswered. We still don't know what happened.

Marcin Rêbacz

…Often Poles consider Belarusians rootless people. They are not Russians, and not Poles – God knows who they are. There is still no pronounced answer to the question, whether Poland is a multi-national state, or it is the place where only Poles live.

Development Prospects of the Region

Aleh Ramashkevich

…There are no such conflicts and oppression now. I don't think they are possible in the future. I think of Poles as of our people. Here are the graves of their ancestors.

Mikola Aksamit

I believe a lot depends on the authorities. If the political situation changes, Belarus would move towards the European Union. If there are any limitations it would be the fault of our authorities, not of the European Union.

Lavon Karpovich

***…** I am Polish by origin, but a Belarusian citizen. I have to*

fight for Belarus and its independence. Belarus is my home. As a Pole, I work for our community.

Barbara Fustochenko

Tolerance towards your convictions, nationality or other principles – this is always ok. But tolerance towards your own nation or your own people is unacceptable.

Jauhen Wapa

…Xenophobia exists. They write on fences: "One, two, three – Belarusian dogs…" But I will tell you an important thing. We should fight that with the help of education. The only thing that does not exist in Bialystok region is inter-cultural education in secondary schools. There is no class where kids would learn about people who live nearby.

Aleh Latyszonak

…We live at home and have all chances for expansion. We can't say our destiny is predetermined. We have two centers of Belarusian culture – Hajnowka and Bielsk towns. Were Belarus a nationally-oriented state, the situation would be absolutely different. Everything what Belarusian community has it created without anybody's help.

Conclusions of the mission

Hrodna region

Generally speaking, there is no observed confrontation on the national, ethnic or religious ground. National groups practically do not experience pressure or discrimination in direct interaction with each other. As a rule, national symbolism is used in conflicts in order to characterize an individual, not a group. Prejudices about mixed marriages are limited.

The main problems for national groups are connected with the activity of the local and central authorities of Belarus: limited spheres of usage of Belarusian language, and obstacles to development of education system for the Polish minority.

Bialystok region

There is a certain tension in the relations between religious and national groups of the region. That does not exclude displays of discrimination on the everyday and official levels. The majority of Polish political organizations do not consider Belarusians and Orthodox Christians a part of the cultural and ethnic context of the region. Real political confrontation is observed, primarily, in the regions where Orthodox and Catholic groups are approximately

equal in size. Such confrontation can be observed in the employment policy and distribution of financial resources.

Potential of inter-ethnic (denominational) conflicts in the region is low. Although there is a certain tension in the mixed (Orthodox and Catholic) districts of Bialystok region, there were no registered facts of conflict, confrontation or ethnically-based actions.

Enlargement of the European Union

Traditionally the European Union is a symbol of economic prosperity and political stability. Nevertheless, people in the region have mixed views on the EU enlargement. Mainly that is connected with reduction of possibilities for cross-border cooperation (as the result of actions of both Belarusian authorities and the EU administration) and problems of crossing the border. People from both sides of the border point out, that the wall between the two countries has become a lot more tangible.

Follow Up

The mission gave an opportunity to research and evaluate national and political situation in the region, and to determine the basic threats to the rights of national minorities. The mission has drawn much attention to the problems of the Belarusian minority in Poland and Polish national minority in Belarus.

Accuracy of the conclusions and adequacy of the assessment of the situation by the mission participants is especially visible in the context of recent facts: charges against members of editorial board of *Niwa* weekly for Belarusians (Bialystok) with financial violations (in the fall-winter 2004) and the conflict between the Belarusian authorities and the Belarusian Union of Poles (2005).

The experience and conclusions made by the mission were published in a book (Study of the Problems of Belarus-Poland Cross-Border Area in the Context of the EU Enlargement, Minsk 2004). The book describes the experience of cultural interaction, basic political, economic (connected with the EU enlargement), and cultural problems of the region. The book may be used in the work of non-governmental and official structures, as well as by organizations of national minorities.

Study of the problems of Belarus-Poland borderland in the context of the EU enlargement (Continued)

September 4-10, 2005

Location: Hrodna region (Belarus), Bialystok region (Poland).

Participants: Malkhaz Chemia (Georgia, Institute for Minorities and Refugees Problems), Andrei Kazakevich (Belarus, political scientist, editor-in-chief of *Political Sphere* magazine), Palina Stsepanenka (coordinator of the Western sub-network of the Working Group, journalist, Belarus). The study was technically supported by Hrodna branch of Lew Sapeha Foundation (Hrodna, Belarus), and Educational Center "Poland-Belarus" (Bialystok, Poland).

Problems:

1. Inter-governmental conflict between Poland and Belarus connected with change of leadership of the Union of Poles of Belarus. Aggravation of relations between Polish minority organizations and Belarusian authorities.

2. Trial over publishers of *Niwa* weekly for Belarusians in Poland.

3. Ethnical diversity of the population divided by the state border. Difficult history of mutual relations, violation of the rights of minorities by both sides in the past and prospects of good-neighborly relations in the future.

4. Enlargement of the European Union – new line of demarcation. To what extent will it divide the diasporas, will assimilation increase, etc. How will the new borders impact the ethnical and political situation?

Objectives:

1. to collect information about history of inter-ethnic relations and their present situation,

2. to collect general information about ethnical and political situation:

- What is the attitude of the minorities to the political situation and the state authorities
- Is there pressure by the authorities on Polish minority organizations in Belarus? Define the type of possible pressure
- Is there pressure by the authorities on Belarusian minority organizations in Poland? Define the type of possible pressure
- Are there registered facts of violation of the rights of national minorities by the authorities?
- Is there a practice of xenophobia and distrust in everyday life?

- To define the level of inter-denominational (Catholic – Orthodox) relations in Poland.

3. The "new border" and development of national communities: consequences and prospects. Attitude of the population to the EU enlargement and the new border – hopes and fears.

4. Prospects of preserving the national culture and identity on both sides of the border.

Belarus

September 4, Lida (Hrodna region)

Stanislau Sudnik, chairperson of Lida city branch of the Belarusian Language Society, member of the Union of Writers of Belarus, chief editor of *Nasha Slova* newspaper of the Belarusian Language Society, chief editor of *Lidzki Letapisets* (Lida Chronicler) magazine (local magazine about local history and literature).

— Could you please tell us about the *Nasha Slova* newspaper? Is it really the only national-level edition, the editorial office of which is located not in the capital?

— *Nasha Slova* newspaper is the national edition published by the Belarusian Language Society. The editorial office used to be located in Minsk. In 1997 the state stopped financing the newspaper and the editorial office was moved to Lida. We are working here for 8 years. Soon we are going to celebrate publishing of the 400th issue prepared in Lida. The goal of the newspaper is to promote the Belarusian language and culture. Meanwhile, for 8 years we have no Belarusians in our team.

— Who is on the staff then?

— Poles, Russians, Ukrainians… It just happens that people join the team and then it turns out that they are Polish or Russian. Our typist is from Siberia, our accountant is Polish…

— How would you assess the relations between the national minorities in Lida, especially in the context of the conflict between the Belarusian authorities and the Union of Poles?

— I wonder who can be called a national minority in Lida… Over half of the city population is Catholic, they are traditionally considered Poles. According to the official data, there are 38% of Poles in Lida. In reality there is only a handful of ethnic Poles in the city. All those Catholics, registered as "Poles" are the local people. Local for centuries, just as I am. They are Romanized Litvins (*people of the Great Principality of Lithuania – ed.*),

local people who converted to Catholicism. They didn't come from anywhere and didn't go anywhere. They have always lived here.

— How do they identify themselves? As Belarusian Catholics or anybody else?

— For example, in our village we identify ourselves as "the gentry". We are the gentry of this land. We have never been serfs or slaves. But we never call ourselves "Poles". Population of the city of Lida is different from our village by the fact that it was formed from both gentry and peasants. A pretty interesting situation has developed. When our "brothers from the East" came from time to time and "wanted to become big friends with us", part of Lida population did not want "to be friends" and would occasionally claim they were "Poles". In contrast to Russia they would say: "we are Poles", and "we are of Polish culture". However, during the recent census 95% of Lida Catholics said Belarusian is their mother tongue. What does it mean? That means if they have a choice between Russian and Polish they will always choose Polish. But if they are to choose between Belarusian and Polish, the majority of people will make their choice in favor of Belarusian. They say: we are the locals.

— Do people follow Belarusian or Polish traditions?

— There are absolutely no difficulties in everyday life. All Belarusian traditions are preserved in the language, rituals and everything else. The only thing is the calendar. For example, Catholics eat *kutssia* (*traditional Christmas dish –ed.*) two weeks earlier than the Orthodox. There are similar traditions and songs for Easter. But Easter is celebrated at different times. All traditions and names of holidays are Belarusian. The traditions here still preserve pagan elements. Even the names of the holidays we use have a pagan origin.

— What about St. George?

— We do not celebrate St. George's Day. We don't know such a holiday. We have St. Yury. In Belarus there are two names – Yury and George. This is the same name in origin. In spring, on St. Yury's day, we always try to start depasture of herd. Even if a person's official name is George, he will be called Yury at home. "Yury" originates from the name of pagan god Yaryla. That's how it was transformed.

— In everyday life, in social environment, do statements "I am Polish" and "I am Belarusian" become an advantage? Are there any advantages in self-identification with a Polish

Catholic or Belarusian group? Can it give certain advantages or lead to discrimination?

— During the Czar rule the Orthodox had the advantage. During the Polish rule the advantage belonged to the Catholics. In order to be able to buy land an individual had to register as "Polish". During the Soviet rule the Poles were the forth on the list of national groups which were not given entry into academies, nuclear industries, etc. I don't think at present there is a problem of belonging to some national group in Belarus.

— Probably, local Catholics are thinking: there is Poland, an independent country, where one can send their kids to study... Do people think that their kids can get more opportunities if their parents call themselves "Poles"?

— There is some truth to that. However, the majority of local Catholics do not bind their personal prospects to Poland. Certainly, some people, who are more energetic, more go-ahead, might think that way: "I'll say I am Polish, I'll get a chance to get into some program, some trip or training course". Or heads of Polish NGOs – they are trying to speak Polish language well. This is normal. They are working, carrying out their activities. We are ready to support their activities. That's absolutely alright. At the same time, we support the activity of Lithuanian groups and activists of other minorities. There is no resistance. Vice versa. Cooperation between organizations is taking place everywhere where it is possible. All radicalism ended in the early 1990's. Back then these issues were critical. But they lost their importance very fast. Here, in Lida, almost one family out of two is mixed. But even they don't have a problem, what church to go to, Catholic or Orthodox one. In a mixed family a mother-in-law would tell the husband of her daughter: "You will be Catholic", and that's it. And he doesn't care.

While traveling around Belarus one can see crosses near villages. Practically everywhere there are two crosses – a Catholic and an Orthodox one — near each other. The crosses are surrounded by one fence, they are intertwined with garlands. That demonstrates that we don't have any inter-ethnic problems here.

— Was the conflict between the authorities and the Union of Poles sensible here?

— The majority of the people do not care about the conflict. The local organization of the Union of Poles of Belarus was concerned only about one thing – how to keep out of it. They

managed to do that. Head of Lida organization of the Union left the leadership of the previous Union and did not join the leadership of the present Union. She didn't go to the last convention – she sent an accountant there. They do not leave the Union, but they do not support the present leadership. They are in a very difficult situation. There is a big and beautiful Polish House in Lida. Poland helped financing its construction. Now it belongs to the Union of Poles. If they leave the Union of Poles, they will lose the building. Besides that, they will lose their legal status, lose the possibility to pay rent and lose the property. Meanwhile, Poland declares that it stops financing the Union of Poles with the new leadership. As always, "lords are fighting, and servants are suffering". Now they all are in the same situation. They have a choice: either to leave the Union and shut down the branch – then, the Union would die without regional structures, or to stay – i.e. to support the new leadership and quarrel with the whole Poland. That's why they just don't know what to do.

— Do you consider this conflict a conflict between a national minority and the authorities or a conflict between the authorities and an independent organization?

— This is quite a simple conflict. The reason for the conflict is the following. When Tadeusz Gawin was the chairman of the Union, the authorities did their best to remove that democratic leader from his post. They were working against him for years, "preparing" the community, "working" with the local activists, and he was voted down. They put Tadeusz Kruczkowski on that position, who chaired the Union for 4 years. But the authorities missed the moment when the situation changed on the local level. They didn't expect that the Union would not re-elect Kruczkowski in 2005. When he was not elected, the authorities were afraid to lose the control over the organization. There would be no conflict should the authorities have real assessment of the situation. Although, I believe, the authorities overestimate the importance of the Union and its meaning.

— What is the real danger of the Union of Poles for the authorities? Why do they want to control it so much?

— The Union and the Polish minority do not represent any danger for the authorities. They are ordinary collective farmers, just as Belarusians.

— Do they have any separative moods?

— Absolutely no separative moods or ideas. Nobody wants to separate from Belarus.

— Can they influence the "political weather" or change it somehow?

— No. I'll give you an example. I am registered as a Pole in official documents. Some time ago I ran in an election from BPF Party. In my district the majority of the population is Polish. The authorities found another Pole, chief physician of the local clinic, to run against me. I moved to Lida some time ago, and he was local. The priest in the Church campaigned for him. And he won the election. He became local councilor. The Poles present absolutely no danger for the authorities. They can always find another Pole who they could use.

— Can you speak about inter-denominational relations in your region?

— I have already said that almost one family out of two here is mixed. There is absolutely no problem that spouses belong to different denominations. Anyone can "convert" to Catholic faith today. If a bride is Orthodox, and a bridegroom is Catholic, they can wed in a Catholic church. The bride can remain Orthodox, this is not a problem. Later they will decide on their own where to baptize their kids. But Catholic priests are more inclined to democracy. As a rule, Orthodox priests stand strictly for the authorities. Catholic priests are often in opposition.

— What language is the language of the service?

— It depends. There are five Catholic churches in Lida. At least one Mass should be in Belarusian. Other Masses are in Polish. Slabada church has all services in Belarusian language. As far as I know, this happens only in Hrodna diocese. In other regions the main language of the Catholic Church is Belarusian. When a priest comes to my village, he asks: "Dear gentry, can I hold the service in Polish language?" And the gentry replies: "only a little bit, ok?"

— What priests do not want to use Belarusian language? Foreign citizens or local ones?

— Foreign priests who come to Belarus use Belarusian language without a problem. Local ones turn to be "bigger Poles" than those who actually came from Poland. Besides that, it turns out people often do not know prayers in Belarusian language. They were taught to pray in Polish in childhood. Sometimes it happens that the priest, who is ethnically Polish, speaks Belarusian, and the people, who are Belarusian, respond in Polish. That's how they hold services.

— Are there any Polish schools for kids?

— There are no Polish schools in Lida. But Catholic churches organize Sunday schools for kids.

— Do they teach kids prayers in Belarusian language?

— We don't really interfere into such things. Recently we had a Mass served for the killed insurrectionists during the uprising of 1863. The Mass was served by a priest from Kaliningrad (Russia) in Belarusian language. The choir sang in Belarusian.

Hrodna bishops do not want to switch to Belarusian language. But they can't do anything. The process is slowly moving towards Belarusian language. There are two languages in this diocese – Belarusian and Polish. No Masses are held in Russian language. That's impossible in our diocese. Sometimes they send a Lithuanian priest, who doesn't speak either Belarusian or Polish. He can say a couple of words in Russian, so that people understand. That happens. Or a priest can ask a couple what language they want him to use during the wedding. If they say Russian, the wedding will be held in Russian. That is possible.

— Are there any services in Belarusian language in Orthodox churches?

— Not anymore. We used to have an Autocephalous Church in Lida. It held services in Belarusian. But it was completely suppressed and returned to the bosom of the Russian Orthodox Church. There are no services in Belarusian language now.

— Did that Autocephalous Church have any parishioners?

— Half of the city were members of that church. When the Autocephalous parish was created half of Lida started to go there, to baptize children there. Local Orthodox Christians are not happy with Moscow Orthodoxy.

All Orthodox churches in Belarus are subordinate to Minsk exarchate. In its turn, the Exarchate is subordinate to Moscow. The autocephalous church began the activity in Lida in 1995. It lasted for about 4 years. It all began when the bishop said: "we will build a cathedral near the market". The parishioners decided building a cathedral is too expensive, they couldn't afford it. They decided to build a usual church and began to build it. The bishop arrived and ordered to demolish the walls and start building a cathedral. Word after word…

The bishop dismissed the local priest and sent here another one. The parishioners gave him the sack and asked the first priest to come back. In order to consecrate a church either a bishop or 4 priests are needed. They couldn't find four autocephalous priests.

Moreover, they couldn't find a bishop. But there is another adroit method. A church is considered consecrated if relics of a saint are brought to it. The relics were brought from a monastery in Greece, on a plane through Moscow. American Autocephalous Church helped with that. The Church was consecrated and here you go – it became subordinate to the US-based metropolitan Ryzhy. That's how that autocephalous parish existed for 3 years.

But they couldn't stand for long. That church united about 30 thousand Orthodox Christians. The priest who began the whole thing died. His brother began to serve. But he turned out to be weaker in spirit. In my mind, the believers were just taken in by promises: metropolitan Filaret displaced the local bishop who was in conflict with the parish. Another bishop played nice and became reconciled with the believers of the autocephalous church. Filaret met with the Church board and promised them money to build the church… Why people came back? I think that happened because they lacked the strong national and ideological basis. There was no one from BPF or BSL (Belarusian Language Society) on the Church board. Community activists had no say in that.

— Was there only one Autocephalous church in Lida?

— Yes, only one church, but it was attended by half of Lida residents. Here the whole thing was incomparably much more serious than in Pahranichny village, which also used to have an Autocephalous church.

— How strong is the impact of religiousness on everyday relations of people?

— In Lida, if you see two people sitting next to each other, most probably one of them is Catholic, and another one – Orthodox. There is no difference. But you have to think about a town which is the size of Lida. Here family relations, clanship, relatives, acquaintances play a much bigger role than faith and ethnicity.

— How lively is the faith of people, or is it a mere tradition?

— It's difficult to judge. It would be a mistake to say that Catholics are more religious than the Orthodox. But Catholics put more emphasis on their piety. They are bigger church-goers. Catholic churches are full. They give more money to the Church. They are more active in their faith. The Orthodox do not aim at demonstrating that they go to church. If a Catholic lady would miss a Sunday Mass once, her neighbors would ask her several times why they didn't see her in Church last Sunday. Someone did not show

up in church – that is an event. Next time it is easier to go to the Mass than to answer numerous questions.

– **What is the official statistics?**

– 38% of local population are Polish. Many Catholics are Belarusian. That is why there are more Catholics, than Orthodox Christians. There are 5 Catholic churches in Lida – more than in Hrodna. There are also 5 Orthodox churches: 3 of them are open, and 2 are still in construction.

It is difficult for the state to interfere with these things. For example, in 1999-2000 Lida mayor passed a Catholic church to the Orthodox. It was a very uneasy decision for him. His wife and mother-in-law are Catholic. He is Orthodox. The situation was the following: the building, which was used as a planetarium during the Soviet times, was originally built as a Catholic church. Then it burnt down. In the czar times the authorities allowed to restore the building but only as an Orthodox church. In 1920 the Poles came and turned the Orthodox church back into Catholic. Then Bolsheviks came, closed the Catholic church and made a planetarium. In the nineties it was difficult to say who the building should belong to. The situation became tense. It almost came to mass disturbances. They had to come to agreement.

General of the Piarists (Catholic order which used to own the church) arrived, and some more high-ranking Catholic and Orthodox priests. Negotiations began. The Orthodox based their arguments on the support of the city authorities, and the fact that "there were no big Orthodox churches or a cathedral". Besides that, after the fire the building was restored and looked as an Orthodox church. Catholics argued that it was originally built by Catholics, and before Bolsheviks turned it into the planetarium it was also a Catholic church. They made a compromise. The building was given to Orthodox Christians, so that they could have a cathedral in the center of the city. Catholics received 2 pieces of land for building two new Catholic churches. That's how the problem was solved. They came to peaceful agreement. Some believers were outraged but a catholic priest said "those who would kick up a row about that should not even try to go to confession".

— Does the state support citizens of Polish origin on the level of daycare and primary schools? Do national minorities feel support from the state?

— The support is declared by the law. If people want to open a Polish class and gather enough students for it, the class will be

open. If they have enough students for a Polish school, they will have a school.

— Does that mean that there is no need in such a school?

— In fact, the state would follow the law. But students who could graduate from a Polish school would have no prospects in Belarus. All higher educational institutions and vocational schools offer Russian-language education. What would graduates do with their Polish school diplomas? Few parents count on the chance to send their kids to Poland. There are optional courses of Polish language which are opened on the wish of the parents. There are enough teachers of Polish language. One course in one school each year satisfies all the need in Polish language. Practically nobody plans to knit up their lives with Poland.

This is the peculiarity of the local population. During the war when the Germans opened a bookkeeping school here, which could be attended only by Belarusians, all Poles registered as Belarusians and went to study in that school.

— In your opinion, what is the right direction for Belarus in the future?

— The right direction in the present context is to join the European Union. There is even a better way – close unity between Poland, Ukraine, and Belarus. Together these countries have over 100 million people and a huge territory, as well as other conditions for development.

September 5, Voranava town (Hrodna region)

Kazimir Misiura, sculptor, arts teacher in a secondary school

— What is the impact of the conflict between the Belarusian authorities and the Union of Poles on the situation in the region? What is the ethnic structure of the population?

— We have 83% of Poles in the district. The next national minority by size are Russians, then – Ukrainians, Tatars, Jews… lately there have been many newcomers from Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. Voranava town has only about 7 thousand people. The structure of the town population is a little different. There are less Poles, and more Russians. There are only few Belarusians. Closer to Hrodna (Radun, Zabalotstse) one can feel stronger impact of Polish minority. We used to have a regional branch of the Union of Poles. It was chaired by Pavel Korpik, head of the local education department. The authorities did not like his behavior during the elections and, to put it mildly, he was asked to leave the post… He moved to Poland.

— Did it happen because he was too much pro-Polish or because he was too pro-democratic?

— All of that. It happened because of his ethnicity, and his pro-democratic activity, and his decency. He has three sons. The elder son is a Catholic priest. The second one is a lawyer, and the third one is a financier. They all received higher education in Poland. His wife is a linguist. She was the first to move to Poland. She found a job in Poland and moved there. Pavel followed his wife. They administered the work of a Polish school in the town. Besides, all students could choose Polish language as an optional subject. When they left the activities slowed down. The work stopped.

Before the repeat convention of the Union of Poles Vaukavysk authorities immediately took the functions of the organizers. They began to gather people, and invite people to the convention. They invited people to the district conference by phone. They didn't want to see me at the district conference at all. But I came. It turned out, nobody had invitation cards. There were few real Poles who were the Union members – no more than 10 people. The rest were policemen, representatives of the executive authorities, etc. There was no quorum. The goal of the conference was to elect delegates to the Union Convention from the district. They did their best in order to elect delegates who would vote as they were told to.

Now the organization exists practically only on paper. They are allowed only to "sing and dance". Some time ago Poles proposed to build a Polish school here, as in Hrodna. But the proposal was smothered. The local authorities do not need an alternative. Politics begins with alternatives. New school, new team, new equipment, parents… Now our school is overcrowded. It has over 100 teachers and about 1, 500 students. The kids have to study almost in 3 shifts. The third shift is the evening school for grown-ups.

I believe in the future the Union members who supported Anzhelika Borys would not remain in the organization. They would quietly and, may be, unofficially, leave the Union. I will definitely not stay with the new leadership. They are not interesting for me.

— Do you plan to leave the Union?

— I can't leave the Union because I am Polish. However, I can't stay because I am a democrat. I respect Anzhelika Borys more than Tadeusz Kruczkowski and Jozef Lucznik.

Our Vaukavysk conference elected good delegates to the Convention. I did not attend the Convention so I don't know

exactly what happened. I heard a little about it from RFE/RL, a little – from BTV and a little – from Radio Polonia. I also talked a lot with the delegates. I came to conclusion that the voting results were rigged. I have no doubt about that. Everything in this country is based on cynicism, falsehood, and falsification. These are the main "values" now.

— What was the attitude of the local Poles to the conflict of the Belarusian authorities with the Union? What did they think of the "anti-Polish films" on the First Channel of Belarusian state TV?

— The people here are very apolitical. The only thing that unites them is the Catholic Church. The people are afraid of only one thing – that when they die their families would bury them without a ceremony in the church. Earlier there was a stone church with oak interior finish here. Later it was ruined and its foundation destroyed. Local House of Culture was built on its place. Later it was turned into a household shop, and even later – into a liquor store. Only then the authorities again gave that piece of land to Catholics and permitted to build the church. An Orthodox church was built on a swamp…

A group of Jews used to live here. Earlier it was just a usual village. The only thing that vivified the atmosphere was the road to Vilna (now Vilnius). There were no streets or a market square. The present Kastrychnitskaya Street consists of the houses brought from farmsteads which were destroyed during the years of collectivization. That's how Voranava appeared. This town is a Soviet district center. There is absolutely nothing here, except for the monument to the Unknown Soldier and a couple of Jewish burial places. The church building is modern. Priests change often, no one of them stayed here for long.

The people do not have an opinion about the conflict of the authorities with the Union of Poles. They don't care about that. Practically at every meeting every time they hear from their bosses – this is politics, don't poke your nose into it. A school principal would tell this to the school teachers, and a chief of a motor depot or farming machines depot – to their workers. In their turn, they hear the same from the people in the executive committee. They get all the instructions and documents from the authorities and later put their policy into practice. People are not concerned. They do not realize that politics is about our future.

Many people were fired. The rest, who kept their jobs, are people who have never fought for their rights: neither professional, nor civic, nor political.

— It seems that in the situation of voting every national community somehow instinctively supports its members. Is it the same here?

— No, it's not. During the parliamentary election we witnessed all possible falsification. According to the official results we even surpassed Homel and Mahilou regions by the number of votes in favor of the regime. Nonsense!

Former head of the district Turchynskaya openly claimed: "while I am in office, there will be no Poles in power". In fact, the problem is that we have never had a local head of the district. They always come from somewhere else – Shchuchyn, Dziatlava, Navahradak, and other places. They all are "transit figures". There are no locals in the prosecutor's office, or KGB department. All the top people, even police chiefs have never been from here. These people are strangers here, they are just puppets, they hold on to their posts like grim death. The only thing they are afraid of is strong pro-Polish moods. The authorities feared that a conflict might unite the people.

I went door-to-door here, and traveled a lot around local villages. I know this district very well, for so many years. There are quiet "kitchen" conversations, but they are very timorous. Local priests have been told: "One squeak from the ambo – and we will say good-bye to you in 24 hours".

— A squeak about what?

— For example, if a priest recommends to think twice during the elections, or to support their minority or their culture, to look carefully and try to make the right choice… I don't exclude that everything that is said in the church could be heard by the security forces. I think there are people who attend a Mass every Sunday and regularly report to the KGB and the town authorities on what happened and what the priest said in the homily. The priests are under very strict control. Town officials regularly invite them for "preventive conversations". If a priest goes out of control, he would simply be deported from the country, because the majority of priests are Polish citizens. At present more and more young Belarusian priests appear. But they would have to live here…

— Denominational factor does not help, does it?

— This is considered politics. If a priest says something of a kind, he would be snapped up immediately.

— What is religion for you personally – a tradition, or a philosophy? Are you Catholic?

— Yes, I am Catholic, but I don't go to church very often. I am not atheist. I was born in an ordinary peasant family. I go to church on religious holidays, and if somebody from my relatives died or is getting married. I respect the religion. Most probably, this is just a tribute to the age-old tradition. I am not very good at reading in Polish. I don't understand everything in Polish. That also keeps me back a little.

— And if Masses were in Belarusian language?

— I would go without questions. If we had a Mass in Belarusian language at least once a month I would gladly attend it. Otherwise I can pray at home. My wife is Orthodox, and children were baptized in an Orthodox church. I am Polish, but I support any holiday. I respect every religion. I feel comfortable in a Catholic church. I behave there decently. May be, even better than others who are "very strong" believers.

— You are a Pole gravitating towards the Belarusian language, aren't you?

— Firstly, I am only half Polish. My father is Polish and my mother is Belarusian. My mother is from Valozhyn district, from a Belarusian village. All my relatives on my mother's side are Belarusians, but Catholics. My father is Polish and Catholic.

Local Poles… It is also a question if they are really Polish. When this part of Belarus was under Poland many Belarusians would become Catholic, and later would change their national identity and call themselves Poles.

— Is there any tension between different national communities, between locals and newcomers, Orthodox and Catholic Christians, Russians and Poles?

— There is almost nothing of the kind in this district. I've been living here for 25 years and have never heard of anything like that. The majority of people here are Poles, and there is only a small percentage of newcomers. They all work quietly; they milk cows on farms and are happy with their lives. Nobody treats them badly. All people, from the Caucasus and from Russia, are treated well. But Russians behave as if they are "cooler". Moreover, Poles have never had a chance to occupy higher posts, even on the level of assistant managers. All people on such posts are newcomers.

— Are people unhappy about that?

— One can't hear any complains. Discontent is damped from the very beginning. Information is concealed. Nothing is published or described anywhere. District censorship prohibits articles about any conflicts.

I personally try not to be rude to people. I am not nice only if somebody oversteps all limits of behavior. I am not irritated about anybody's skin color, or eye color, or nose form, or haircut, or what a person does. I can only be indignant with somebody who behaves beyond all norms.

A Russian policeman feels a lot better here. He is not criticized so much. If he took a false step somewhere it is not exposed so much. He would be fired not right away, but later. He really needs to spite somebody so that it is seen by the naked eye – only then he would be fired.

— Are there any locals among police officers?

— There are local people among policemen, but mostly they are sergeants. Only children and grandchildren of those who hold top positions here get sent to Minsk, to study in the Police Academy. Or collaborators, who agreed to serve in such circumstances. During the thaw some of our kids got their education in Poland. Probably, now all the study programs would stop.

— What do you mean when you talk about the "thaw"?

— I mean the time before the referendum of 1995. White-red-white flags were on each official building. It was a good time for business, people perked up, they began to build houses, they had money, and they started saving… Then regression came, the changes were drastic. To what extent will the regression continue? We harvested 6 million tons of grain? Well, let's feed it to the cattle. We'll feed the cattle and will have meat. We will eat meat and drink vodka – this is all our life. Suggesting we should do something… For example, we had a concert of Polish songs. The district authorities crossed out all march songs from the program – the songs that could light up the audience. They left only songs about animals – butterflies and hedgehogs.

If a refugee moves here and starts to praise the authorities saying it's heaven here – they make a "poster" out of them. Such refugees would receive a wage rise, and a house to live in…

— So, the situation is quite far from self-governance…

— You are absolutely right. It is very far from that. It's a rural district; there is no industry, no young people, and no college students. All teachers who come here are the people of the system. For example, in Hrodna University, in my opinion, there are about 30-40% of teachers with normal views, and 3-5% are hard pro-democrats. But they can't say anything during lectures, because there is always a sneak among students who would immediately

inform the administration. There is a KGB department in every university.

When I see school kids wearing red ties with green stripe, I feel bad. I thought we have said good bye to such things. It turns out I was wrong.

— Do you have any problems at work?

— I used to. I am in good relations with other teachers and students. The administration is trying to humiliate me or to get me into trouble, they use different measures, but they don't have any arguments against me. They write reports about me in the style of "black PR". It is always like that here: if they throw mud at you, it's you problem. It's up to you how you are going to return your good name. In a village such things are spread in a moment. That creates mockery, gossip, etc. People have ruined themselves by drinking. They don't think about anything. Many are unemployed. One can live in clover, and another would not be able to earn a living by hard work. And if you drink – you can drink all night long.

— What about drug addiction?

— There is less of that here. If there are any incidents, they happen at the farming vocational school. But all students are from Navahradak, Lida – they are not locals. Local kids, from local families, only heard about the stuff. Some may want to try it, but no incidents were registered. There was one HIV-positive person registered in the district, but he was also not local. It seems to me people here are rather pious and quiet; kids are well-bred. Children of policemen and officials behave worse. They try to grasp the initiative. They join the pro-Lukashenka Belarusian Youth Union, and become "leaders"

Besides that, there is local migration here. Young people move to cities. College graduates rarely return to their home town.

September 5, Radun (Hrodna region)

Ivan Feseyenka, historian, director of regional museum

— I am Belarusian by origin. My mother is Polish, my father is Ukrainian, but I am Belarusian. Here I was born, I received education here, and I live here. My kids were born here as well.

— What can you say about the situation with the Union of Poles?

— The convention of the Union, which took place in Vaukavysk, was not recognized by conscious Poles. The authorities have lost control over the organization and they had to have "their"

person in the leadership. Real Poles did not attend the Convention. What then the vertical would do? For example, in Zabalotstse village the leader of the local Union refused to hold a meeting and elect delegates to the Convention. Then deputy chairperson of the district executive committee came to the village and held the meeting himself. The executive committee does not have the right to do that, and the deputy chairperson is not a member of the Union. He is a person from the "vertical". Nevertheless, the meeting was held, and delegates to the district conference were nominated. The same happens on the district level. That's how the authorities elected delegates to the convention in Vaukavysk. The bus for the delegates was provided by BRSM (*pro-Lukashenka Belarusian Youth Union – ed.*). The delegates were accompanied by the head of ideology department of the executive committee, so that they can't get off the bus on the way to the convention. Finally, we have the result: the ideology boss brings representatives of Voranava district to the convention in Vaukavysk.

One of my friends was there. She told me they were forced to go, otherwise they were threatened they would lose their jobs. She went, but voted "against" on all proposed questions. That convention was strictly controlled by the executive vertical. The authorities interfered into the affairs of a non-governmental organization. That happened already on the stage of preparation of the convention. Every "delegate" was invited to a "conversation" with the local authorities before attending the convention. They had a conversation with chairperson and deputy chairperson of the executive committee. They were told to "vote as everyone", and "raise their hands on time".

— What are the relations between the national groups: Lithuanians, Poles, Belarusians, Tatars, etc?

— Four years ago KGB agents visited me. They told me: "it is rumored that Belarusians are devising a plot against Poles, Poles are laying a plot against Lithuanians, etc." I told them, nobody was devising anything, until the state began to devise its own plots. Then, it would strike an attitude and try to reconcile us. First the authorities would stir up conflicts, and then they would "reconcile" the sides. This is a "communist" approach to thing. The state is interested in the conflicts between national or religious groups. The fuss around the Union of Poles is beneficial only for the authorities. They want to intimidate people, to spread a rumor that "the Poles want to separate" – this is ideology. The ideology

is aimed at average citizens, ordinary people who can be intimidated. This has already happened in history. Been there, done that.

— What was the reaction of the local people to the conflict of the authorities with the Union of Poles?

— The intellectuals were aware from the very beginning, what it was done for. And ordinary farmers here… Now ordinary farmers are angry. Collective farms took everything from them. One should realize: now the village is not so much pro-Lukashenka, as many people think. For example, during the elections I collected signatures in a village near Radun. I knock on the first door. Old ladies began to swear at Lukashenka. People living in the center of the village also had a lot of negative things to say about the present government. That's the moods in the villages today. The convention of the Union of Poles was mostly attended by teachers, young women. There were few men, also intimidated. Before they came to the Convention each had had a conversation with the deputy chairperson of the executive committee. They had been told they would lose their jobs in case something went wrong. Even after such conversations, many voted "against" the proposals of the authorities.

— In your opinion, were the elections at Vaukavysk convention rigged?

— Of course. Do you think the authorities managed to gather their supporters? Many people were forced to come, but they still voted "against". In Radun we have a strong branch of the Union. It also split up. Radun was always a stronghold of the Union. Tadeusz Gawin has a great authority here. Here we have the biggest percentage of Poles in the country. Such districts have the right to self-governance. Our state is afraid of that. But self-governance is good. Until we don't have self-governance, we won't have anything.

— How in your mind will the situation around the Union develop?

— The present chairperson Lucznik is a puppet of the authorities. The authorities would always support him. However, the authorities do not realize that it is a delayed-action mine. At present the Polish organization is split up. The division occurred during the last parliamentary elections. Tadeusz Kruczkowski wanted to run here, in Voranava district. But local Poles told him: "don't even try to run here". He collected only a couple hundred signatures here and realized he had made the wrong choice of a district.

That says a lot. He had absolutely no support here. Don't we know him, or what? We know him very well. I think the authorities achieved their goal for now. Firstly, they divided the non-governmental organization. Secondly, now the official Union of Poles is the right arm of the authorities. The majority of the patriotic Poles in Voranava district, who were founding members of the Union, did not recognize the changes. How can such organization work? The chairperson would come to Voranava – who would he come to? The executive committee?

— **He would not go to the people?**

— Who exactly? The executive committee is the only place where he would be welcome. He would talk with the deputy chairperson, that's it. What people he can go to, if they do not recognize him? Only the people who really chose him – the town officials… Heads of local branches remained honest people. They did not attend the convention and did not send anyone there. The authorities held the convention and elected leadership of the Union themselves.

— **What is the attitude of Poles to Belarusians, and what is the attitude of Belarusians to Poles and Russians? What is the attitude of the local people, who were born here, to newcomers?**

— In 1975, when I, a college graduate, came to Radun, many people would meet me on the street and call me a "soviet". Soon they realized I am a good person, a real Belarusian, and changed their attitude. Everybody who came from the East was nicknamed a "soviet" here.

I will tell you my story. I helped the Lithuanian community in Peliavy to organize a museum. I have wonderful relationship with Tatars, Lithuanians, and Poles. That's how everybody lives here. No one fuels tensions here. There is no hostility here, although the district is near the border. Different national and religious communities have always lived there. They have always lived in consent.

But when the authorities run the ideological propaganda machine, people begin to look at each other differently. They look with a question in the eyes: "who are you?", "who do you support?" The authorities try to stir up the conflict and later play the role of defenders and peace-makers.

— **What is the religious situation in Radun?**

— The closest Orthodox Church is in Voranava. There is an Orthodox community of about 1.5 thousand people in Radun. I am

also Orthodox. My wife is Catholic and Polish. That's how it was in the family of my parents – my father is Orthodox, and my mother is Catholic, born in Krakow.

September 6, Hrodna city

Tadeusz Gawin, founder of the Union of Poles in Belarus

— There is no conflict between the Belarusians and the Poles, who live in Belarus. There is a conflict between the Poles and the authorities.

— What is the reason for the conflict and what is it based on?

— The state authorities are in long process of taking the control over all non-governmental organizations and political parties in Belarus. In the opinion of the authorities, everything, that can't be destroyed, should be controlled. As a result, we have two parties of Belarusian Popular Front, three Social Democratic Parties, two Communist parties, etc. These are the results of such policy. In 1988-2000 the Union of Poles was really an independent organization. It was not manipulated by either Polish government, or the official Minsk. We had our own independent policies. We had such an opportunity despite the fact that the organization was financed by Warsaw.

In 2000 the authorities managed to get their person elected as the chairperson of the Union. Since that time until March 2005 the Union was controlled by the authorities. The authorities manipulated the Union as much as they could. In 2005 at the March convention we elected the new leader who was to restore independence of the Union and, as a result, re-establish cooperation with the Belarusian pro-democratic organizations. That intimidated the regime. The authorities were mostly intimidated by the fact that such a big and strong organization would leave the sphere of the government's influence?

— Why is the regime interested in governing the Union of Poles through its people?

— Firstly, the presidential election is to take place soon. One of the objectives of the regime is to neutralize the Union and draw it on the side of the authorities. This is the main reason. The forces which lost the Union elections used that interest of the authorities. They skillfully described to the authorities what would happen if the leadership elected at the March convention stayed on their posts. They explained to the authorities that the new leadership of the Union would cooperate with the Belarusian pro-democratic

organizations, with the forces in opposition, and would not back the incumbent President at the elections. They played on the feelings of the regime and the regime entered into the process. As a result, the Ministry of Justice ruled to recognize the March convention and the elected leadership illegitimate. That was the beginning of the conflict between the newly elected leadership of the Union and the authorities who wanted to have their people inside. The authorities managed to insist on their scenario. At the repeat convention in Vaukavysk the authorities put their person – Jozef Lucznik – as the chair of the organization, and appointed other people to top positions.

I know new members of the Union administration, board, and council very well. The chairperson had no influence whatsoever. The authorities ran the whole thing.

We do not think this convention is legitimate. We recognize the leadership of the Union which was elected at the first convention in March. Only this leadership is legitimate. It should and will manage the organization.

— In fact, it's a diarchy. There are leaders of the Union, recognized by the official Minsk, and leaders, recognized by Warsaw…

— …and there are Union members who live and work here.

It's not easy to talk about the rights of national minorities in the present Belarus. The authorities do not observe the rights of the indigenous population – Belarusians. The titular nation does not have Belarusian schools; Belarusian culture is practically not developing.

We, the Polish community, are completely aware of the fact that only in democratic Belarus we can talk about development of national minorities, including our community.

— How does the present, pro-government, leadership of the Union explain its position? How do they explain their cooperation with the authorities? What do they build their arguments on?

— I know these people very well. Some of them used to work under my supervision. The new chairperson claims, he "joined the Union in order to save the organization from de-legalization and collapse". I would like to say only one thing – it's impossible to save the organization with the people who are surrounding him. It is possible only to destroy it. These people have absolutely no moral or any other kind of authority among the Polish national minority in Belarus. Moreover, we suspect them of being connected with the special services. During the Soviet times many of them

were prepared by the authorities in the case of Soviet occupation of Poland. They were guaranteed positions in newspapers and magazines which were to be printed here and distributed in Poland. We know that, and they claimed that themselves in the press.

— What was the reaction of ordinary members of the Polish community?

— There is huge deficit of information. Representatives of Polish national minority have no information. Those, who listen to the Polish radio, watch Polish TV and read Belarusian independent newspapers naturally have the same opinion as I. But the majority of people are poorly informed. Many of them know nothing about the conflict. Nevertheless, the majority supports the leaders elected at the March convention.

Regional leaders of our organization have not participated as delegates at Vaukavysk convention.

There were absolutely no people who are respected by the Polish community. They refused to take part in that buffoonery. That says a lot. Many leaders of local organizations completely ignored the convention in Vaukavysk. The authorities appointed people. I saw the list of the main board. I know the intrigues inside... If the board consists of such people as a journalist of *Homelskaya Pravda* from Homel, or the head of culture department of Miory executive committee... What can I say...?

Jozef Lucznik, the present chairperson of the organization, has no idea what's going on on the national level. He couldn't appoint these people himself. It's the first time I hear the name of the journalist from Homel. It's absolutely clear for me that the authorities selected those people.

The authorities selected delegates, brought them to the convention, and carried out the whole convention. This is an uncovered interference into the affairs of an independent non-governmental organization.

— The conflict around the Union was accompanied by an aggressive propaganda campaign in the state-owned mass media. Did the campaign have a negative impact on the personal relations of people in the region?

— No, because people understand everything. No one trusts the state mass media, especially television. My daughter-in-law works in a hospital, where the majority of employees are Belarusians. She told me that the people, knowing what family she was from, supported her and demonstrated sympathy and understanding.

— How does the organization operate in the conditions of a diarchy?

— The situation is not developed yet. The main problem is that now all property of the Union belongs to the people who cooperate with the authorities. We have practically nothing left of the property which belongs to the Union. But I think this is not the most important thing. The Union is not the buildings and property. The Union is people. We don't need huge buildings to meet and work with people. We can arrange a meeting at someone's house, or invite people to visit us. It is very important that everyone is very well aware of what happened in reality.

— You say there were illegitimate delegates at the repeat convention, many of whom were not even members of the organization. Having the proofs you could try to achieve the truth by legal means...

— We are planning to gather all documents and file a complaint to the Supreme Court. In general, the whole process of revocation of the election results and recognizing the convention illegitimate is violation of the Belarusian law. The Ministry of Justice does not have the right to revoke the convention. It can be done only by the Supreme Court, because we are a national-level organization. This is already a violation of the law. At present Belarus is a country, where laws are violated and not respected. For example, when I was sentenced to 15 days of jail and served the term, the authorities organized a provocation against me. I was sentenced to 15 more days in jail. Everybody, including the judge, was aware of the matter and knew what was going on. Still the judge brought in a politically-motivated verdict. The same happens with the Union. It was a political decision not to recognize the legally elected leadership and to appoint the people controlled by the authorities. However, I still think we need to file a complaint to court, although it does not make decisions on its own.

— Could you tell us about the provocation against you?

— I was in a cell together with another person. All of a sudden they move a criminal to our cell. My cellmate was sent to work, and two of us, the criminal and I, were left alone in the cell. He began to pester me, provoking a fight, swearing and using obscene language. I did not react. However, the administration accused me of beating him. That was done to keep me in jail , so I don't attend the convention in Vaukavysk.

— Which local branches are the strongest in the Union?

— In Hrodna, Lida, Baranavichy, Minsk…

I don't think the present situation in the Union is a fatal tragedy. Just some people received the property of the Union for temporary use. Let them use it – a year, two, five, or, may be, ten years… Still, in the end it will return to the legally elected people. We won't even need to hold another convention. Those, who were legally elected, will return and will manage the organization.

I think the authorities are planning the following. The West – Europe, the States, and Poland are very critical towards the regime of Lukashenka. By appointing their people as leaders the authorities will try to force them to declare their support of the regime on the eve of the presidential elections. So that it looks like that: "Poland is against Lukashenka, but our Polish minority supports him". I believe the authorities are preparing something of the kind. It would be a shame for us, the Poles, who live in Belarus. We do not agree with such an opinion.

— What is your vision of the future in this situation; how do you envision the development of the Polish community in Belarus?

— The authorities will support the appointed leadership of the Union. Certainly, they will have control over all initiatives of the new leaders. Most probably, the activities of the Union will be limited to folklore. They will not be allowed to build and open new Polish schools. There will be obstacles created for teaching Polish language. On the other hand, we realize it is not possible to promote Polish language and open Polish schools, when the authorities close down Belarusian schools. That's why folklore is the only thing which is left. They can bring a Polish music group to some concert: "look, we are fine, we dance and sing. Everything is alright!" This year only 13 students came to the first grade of the Polish school in Hrodna. This is the result of the state propaganda. This has happened for the first time in history. When we started the Polish school in Hrodna, we had about 100 students in one grade. Last year 40 kids came. This year – only 13…

— Can we say that the authorities brought the organization activity from ethnical and culture field to the legal sphere? Are you going to support the democratic candidate at the presidential elections, despite all the problems you had?

— Yes, we are going to work among the Polish minority. We will campaign and persuade them to vote for the candidate of the pro-democratic opposition. No doubt. That's why the authorities

fought against us – they knew what views we have and how we will act.

— What relations do you have with the Belarusian pro-democratic forces?

— We are in great relations. We have a permanent contact with pro-democratic political parties and organizations. There is only one problem. The elections are not real in our country. I ran to the parliament. I collected about 10 thousand signatures. They simply refused to register me as a candidate. We don't have real local elections, real parliamentary election, or real presidential election. The election commissions appointed by the authorities just announce the results prepared in the corridors of power.

I was an observer during the election and I saw that nobody was actually counting the votes. When for participation in a picket a person gets either a fine of 2.5 thousand dollars or 15 days of jail… If a person can't pay his property is taken away. Can anybody be happy about that? The authorities deprived us of the last right – to protest against the lawlessness. It is not allowed to protest. The authorities can do whatever they want, but ordinary people are not allowed to protest against that. That's how laws work in Belarus now.

— What is your attitude to the EU enlargement and the fact that Poland joined the EU?

— We salute that. Good economic development of Poland is good for us. This process will convince Belarusians that the road to the West is better than the one to the East. It's better to be in Europe than in Asia.

— Poland and Lithuania have been members of the EU for over a year. How did that influence the life of the region? Was it positive or negative for the region, in your opinion?

— I don't think people in the region changed their attitude to the neighboring countries. The EU enlargement had an impact on the possibility to cross the border. Now people need a visa to visit Poland. That creates certain inconveniences. However, Poland proposed the visa regime which now works between Poland and Ukraine: Poland would not charge anything for visas for Belarusians. Instead, Polish citizens would not need a visa to visit Belarus. But our authorities refused. I would say this is the only negative factor. I don't see any other negative events happening in the region because of the EU enlargement.

I think Poland can be a good example for Belarus. It can show how Belarus can live in the future. However, Poland faces its own

problems. Unemployment, for instance. Nevertheless, positive changes are obvious. Poland is changing to the better. I see improvements every time I visit Poland. They can be seen with the naked eye. The climate in the society is absolutely different. There is a lot more freedom in the sphere of civic and political rights. For example, Polish TV would always show different points of view. In Belarus people are suppressed by the apparatus of power, and propaganda on the radio and TV. People in Belarus are oppressed and demoralized.

September 6, Hrodna

Mieczyslaw Jaskievicz, chairperson of Hrodna city organization of the Union of Poles, and Andrzej Paczobut, editor-in-chief of *Magazyn Polski* (The Polish Magazine)

Andrzej Paczobut

— The development of events in Belarus demonstrates that the sphere of freedom has been strongly restricted. Now it is impossible for a big non-governmental organization to remain uncontrolled by the authorities. It is not even possible to remain neutral. NGOs can only yield to complete control of the authorities. During the last three years the Union of Poles was under absolute control of the government. That happened due to the former chairperson – Tadeusz Kruczkowski. He was elected in 2000. Since 2002 he began to slow down the activities of the organization. He did not fight for the rights of the Poles. He tried to smooth away all the vexed problems. Everything was calm and quiet. When the new election was to take place (chairperson of the Union is to be elected every 4 years), Tadeusz Kruczkowski attempted to delay the election by consent of the authorities.

— How did that happen?

— The election in the Union was to take place in the fall of 2004. In violation of the Union statute, the authorities allowed him to remain in office until 2005. The Ministry of Justice issued a paper that he can delay the election.

— What was the reason for that?

— For the Ministry of Justice he explained the delay by the fact that the Union had no money to hold the convention. However, that was not true. The Polish donors, who supported the Union financially, were ready to provide resources for the convention any time. Tadeusz Kruczkowski claimed they had no money and the Ministry gave him a paper that it was ok not to hold a convention. Meanwhile, there was a group of people in the Union

who could not agree with such severe violations of the Statute: besides the delay, meetings of the Union board did not take place, all the management was carried out by one person. This is the real reason for the inner conflict in the Union. Besides that, T. Kruczkowski was accused of moral and financial carelessness.

The authorities put strong pressure on the delegates already before the convention in March. All over the country heads of municipal ideology departments met with the delegates and told them who they should support at the convention. However, despite all the pressure, it was a secret ballot. I think if the voting was not secret, Anzhelika Borys would have never won the election. The people would be afraid to vote for her openly.

The pressure was very strong. There is even a statement of the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs about intimidation of members of the Union of Poles. In Brest region, for example, in Pinsk, such facts were very evident.

Such stories continued even during the convention. Papou – head of department for affairs of religious and national minorities of Hrodna region executive committee – attended the convention. During the breaks he came up to the delegates and told them: “look, I am watching you, remember, how we talked and I told you who to vote for?” However, it was a secret ballot, and that saved the situation. The Counting committee did an honest count of the votes, and the winner was Anzhelika Borys.

The next day after the convention, during her first day as the chair of the Union, she was visited by a person who proposed her to cooperate with the State Security Committee (KGB). She was told if she refused to cooperate the following would happen... Well, they kept their promise. She refused, and from that moment the authorities began to force their way. They did everything in order to crush down Anzhelika Borys. When they failed to break her, they tried to break the Union.

Mieczyslaw Jaskievicz

— The Polish House in Hrodna was attacked by the OMON (riot police). They used violent measures against us.

Andrzej Paczobut

— On 12 May 2005 the Ministry of Justice made a decision that the convention in March was illegal.

— What was the decision based on?

— It is an entire fabrication. The reasons were far-fetched. One could invalidate any convention of the Union for the same

reasons. There are registered organizations which are structural parts of the Union – for example, clubs of victims of political repression, *Armija Krajowa* underground army veterans, doctors, etc. From the very beginning, these organizations have always sent delegates to conventions. And here the Ministry claims it was a violation. It is well-known that *Glos znad Niemna,* the newspaper of the Polish minority in Belarus, is not an independent legal entity, but a structural unit of the Union of Poles. The newspaper has always sent one delegate to every convention. All of a sudden the Ministry of Justice claims the newspaper could not have a representative because "it is an independent legal entity". They didn't even find time to contact the Ministry of Information and find out the reality. The reasons for invalidating the convention and its results are fabricated and have absolutely no grounds.

Through the fault of the authorities some local structures of the Union were not re-registered. There were some problems with delegates from such structures, although they were official members of the Union. Besides that, we know it was the plan of the authorities to invalidate the convention if their candidate Tadeusz Kruczkowski was not re-elected. During the Council meeting Tadeusz Kruczkowski lobbied some issues about delegates. Later the decisions he lobbied turned out to be violations and became the official reason for the Ministry to invalidate the convention. For example, he demanded to invite delegates from the society of historians and from the society of Polish scientists. Later it turned out that those structures exist only on paper, but not in reality. Kruczkowski forged the minutes of their meetings.

— One of the serious claims of the Ministry of Justice was registration of members of the organization. Doesn't Belarusian Constitution guarantee the freedom of association?

— Yes, the Constitution guarantees that.

There is one more interesting circumstance. The Ministry of Justice canceled the results of the convention, but did not issue a warning to the organization. It just made a recommendation: we advise that the Union carries out a repeat convention. The main board of the Union, elected unanimously during the convention, gathered and made a decision: there would be no repeat conventions because the recommendations of the Ministry were politically-motivated. That was a legally grounded decision. The response of the main Board of the Union to the Ministry was printed in mass media and received publicity. Issuing a warning to the Union

would be a logical step then. If that happened, we would be able to appeal the Ministry's decision to the Supreme Court. But no warning was made. Instead, the authorities began to put serious pressure on the organization. The authorities have practically seized and nationalized the newspaper. The printing presses refused to print the newspaper which they received from the editorial team. At the same time a group of people who had nothing to do with the Union were printing a newspaper under the same title. The newspaper was used in order to discredit the elected leaders. It was published with numerous violations of the law. For example, the name of its editor was concealed. The authorities began an information war.

— Who publishes the newspaper now?

— Now it belongs to the official leadership of the Union, recognized by the authorities. Now it says who its editor-in-chief is. But for a month the newspaper came out with numerous violations. No one wanted to put his name under it. Any person could see the violations with the naked eye. In fact, the newspaper was edited by the special services. Then the brother of Tadeusz Kruczkowski put his signature on it. Still, everybody knows that he can't read and write in Polish.

— How do you see the process would develop?

— I think there will be two organizations. One organization, recognized by Poland and the majority of members of the Union, who live here. And the second one, recognized by the Belarusian authorities.

— Are you going to defend the decisions of the March convention?

— We discussed the situation. Most probably, we will write a complaint to the Supreme Court. But we don't see any possibility to defend our position. I will give you just one more example of unlawfulness. When I was traveling to Vaukavysk convention, the police detained me. First they took me to a police station, then – to Hrodna, then – back to Shchuchyn, where they brought criminal charges against me. When I came to Shchuchyn, they also showed me a police report that in the afternoon of the same very day (exactly when they took me to Hrodna) I used obscene language near Shchuchyn police station. Later the court found me guilty of that.

Mieczyslaw Jaskievicz

— This is how they sentenced me. I was charged with preparation and holding of an unauthorized rally on August 27. They

showed me a police report dated August 27. I tell them: “It’s only August 26. I am not even there yet…” They just wanted to lock in some people.

— Could you tell us about repression against members of the Union of Poles in more detail?

— The authorities brought criminal charges against 4 people, including me. The situation looked like this. We came to visit our local branch in Shchuchyn and examine the situation there. They have a Polish House, which belongs to the Union. The reason for examination was the fact that director of the Polish House, supporter of T. Kruczkowski, leased half of the building. The official lease agreement said the building was leased on gratuitous basis. It means that commercial companies used the offices for free and officially paid no money for that. Weird situation. In any country it would be assessed as a hidden corruption and that would be the job of the law-enforcing bodies to deal with the case. However, the law-enforcing bodies did nothing. We came, examined the situation and found out that commercial companies did pay the rent. We talked to the management of the companies and they confirmed they paid cash personally to the director of the Polish House. When he realized we understood how he was doing his little business he began to write that we were intimidating and threatening him. The authorities brought a criminal charge against us under Article 85 – compulsion.

Besides that, the police detained and arrested us many times without any reason. The authorities were really unhappy to see us traveling around Belarus and meeting with leaders of regional structures. They were absolutely mad about that.

— How do you plan to defend your rights?

Andrzej Paczobut

— We are thinking about filing a complaint to the UN Commission for Human Rights. Lawyers recommend to use this method, although it may take even five years. We are dealing with the legal side of the issue. Although, in my opinion, it is more important now to try to keep our structures. We are going to travel around Belarus and visit our local structures. We will try to convince people that it is necessary to file a complaint to the Ministry of Justice. If they deny the complaint (and they will do it, no doubt) we will appeal to the Supreme Court. The decision of the Supreme Court is quite predictable as well. How-

ever, due to the hearing in court many more people will hear the truth about the way the authorities organized the convention and nominated delegates to it.

In fact, the authorities did not manage to gather a quorum at any of the regional meetings. They held the meetings, but there was no quorum. For example, there are about 700 members in Zabalotstse branch of the Union. Only 5 people attended the first meeting. When the Polish TV showed that fact, the authorities organized another meeting, with 60 participants. 32 of them were not members of the Union. They all voted unanimously. Many of the participants did not even understand Polish, they just raised their hands. The situation was absolutely absurd. The convention was prepared not by T. Kruczkowski or J. Lucznik – the present leaders; the convention was prepared directly by the authorities.

I met with J. Lucznik one day before the meeting of the Main Board, in which he was to participate. I came to his house and told him: "you are a respected person, one of the founders of the organization, how can you go there?" He told me: "I promised". He added that he promised that not to T. Kruczkowski… Who then? Only later we found out that he had had a conversation with high-ranked officials.

— How did the situation effect the circulation of the *Glos znad Niemna* newspaper?

— The circulation decreased by half. It used to be about 5 thousand copies, now it is about 2 thousand. I don't think the newspaper will manage to grow back.

Mieczyslaw Jaskievicz

— Local people now call the newspaper the "creepy" one. They used that name for a newspaper which was published by the Nazis during their occupation of Warsaw. The newspaper was published in Polish, but it was not a Polish newspaper. It was a newspaper of the Nazi Germany. The Poles called it "creepy" from the word "reptile" in Polish.

— How did the situation reflect on the city organization?

— We do not recognize the last convention. Before that convention there was a meeting of the Union city branch. No one knew about the meeting. It was held secretly, in a Polish school, by the school principal. We don't know who took part in it and what delegates were elected.

September 6

Natalia Makushyna, reporter covering the conflict around the Union of Poles in independent newspapers.

— I am Russian by origin, a "daughter of an invader". I live here. I write my articles in Belarusian. I also know Polish language and work as a reporter for the *Birzha Informacyi* newspaper. For us Poland has always been a foreign country. In the 1970's people received a chance to visit it… It was really a foreign country then. Everything was different from the Soviet Union – different music, different newspapers, and different television. They openly spoke about the "Soviet pigsty" and other things we could only whisper about. This region near the border is very closely connected with Poles. People here have different brains.

— What do you think about the conflict around the Union of Poles? What are the reasons behind it? Why did the scandal break out now?

— First of all, it was a conflict of the previous leadership of the Union of Poles and the authorities. It is a very old conflict. It dates back long time ago. Some people are presenting it as a "new" conflict, because of misunderstanding or lack of knowledge. Or they pervert the facts on purpose. Anyway, this is not true, the conflict is very old.

Some people want to present the situation the following way: some Poles could not get on with other Poles and now two groups are fighting for the money which is coming from Poland. This is absolutely false. I know the founders of the Union of Poles for ages. One of them is Tadeusz Gawin. Now people call him the honorary chairperson of the Union. Tadeusz Gawin chaired the Union from the moment of its creation until 2000. In 1999 the Committee for affairs of religious and national minorities sent a letter to the Ministry of Justice asking to suspend registration of the Union. They did not even hide the reason. It was stated in the letter: "Tadeusz Gawin engaged into opposition activities and established contacts with BPF (Belarusian Popular Front)". BPF is a swear-word in our country.

The Council of Ministers told the Committee for religious and national minorities to explore the situation. Uralski, member of the committee prepared a "Memo about activities of the Union of Poles". The memo reported about the work of the organization, its goals and objectives, that it was true that the "chairman got mixed up with the opposition", that "opposition built their nest in

the Union of Poles", and "in Polish schools they teach wrong interpretation of the history of the 1930's". The coup in the Union happened in 2000 because of that memo. T. Kruczkowski was brought to power. There is no doubt here. One of the young journalists attended the convention in 2000, and observed the election. Gawin could not stay in power any more. He chaired the organization for 12 years. It was time for him to retire. It happened so that only that journalist had a mobile phone. She worked for Hrodna TV at that time. She got a call from a person from KGB who openly ordered her: "you will report to me about all the nuances. We are pushing our guy through. If you notice anything special – give me a call". She says she never called him back. There was no need. The "guy" got elected.

The authorities did not want the people elected at the March convention to lead the Union of Poles. Yes, there were inaccuracies during the convention, just as at any convention of any non-governmental organization. One could find them if needed. T. Gawin was saying that during the convention, before the election, he talked to Uralski and asked him why he was "killing" the Union. The answer was: "it is you who is "killing" the Union and you will soon see it yourself".

I asked both T. Kruczkowski and the new Union chair J. Lucznik about the examples of political activity of the previous leaders. They could not give any concrete examples. The *Sovetskaya Belorussia* "blabbed out" that the Union of Poles was financing the opposition. It said that "the financial streams for the opposition were stopped after change of the leadership in the Union". Still, they failed to give any examples or present concrete facts.

The conflict around the Union of Poles is the conflict of the authorities and some members of the Union. At present its activists are persecuted. I think this situation reflects the general situation in the country. We all were born in the USSR, that's why people are sitting quietly in their own borrows.

During four years in office T. Kruczkowski worked only for one goal – to "kill" the organization. He violated the Statute by all possible means. When the new leadership had been elected the Ministry of Justice woke up. All of a sudden they saw the violations. Didn't they see what was happening 4, 5 years before that? In 2002 members of the local Board went on hunger strike because the Board did not gather for meetings as it was provided in the Statute. In November 2004 the chairperson failed to call another

convention and to hold an election, although his term in office ran out and he had to call the new election. I asked him why he failed to do that. He replied they had no money. Meanwhile, the Polish side stopped financing the Union only in December, when the board of Hrodna city organization asked them to do so, because the money kept getting lost…

— In Kruczkowski's interview to you he presents himself as the savior of the Union…

— He always says that. And he puts an ideological base under his role of the savior. He says that not everyone in Poland supports the "March" leadership. Poland is just a country, the same as Belarus – some people support the new leadership, some – don't. The majority of people just don't know anything. The *Glos znad Niemna* newspaper was in absolute mess. People receive a newspaper and see… I heard people calling to the office of the Union and asking: "what did the Glos write, is it true?" They were explained that the newspaper had been published by other people. That means that people in the regions kept getting the newspaper and didn't know anything about the situation.

— Why do you think the repeat convention was held in Vaukavysk?

— It was also a surprise for me. They couldn't hold it in Hrodna, because here the Polish community is the most active. So they needed to "hide" the convention somewhere in the regions. Most probably, there was just a good conference room for it in Vaukavysk. However, in my opinion, the place of the convention didn't matter. Minsk organization ignored the convention.

This is the division the authorities wanted so much. In fact, they achieved their goal.

In general, the situation looks like special services' action to destroy the Union. It used to be a very strong and influential organization.

— Could the Union really be used as a channel to support the opposition and the "colored revolution?" Did the anxiety of the authorities have any ground?

— I can't imagine how one could use the accounts of the Union to finance the opposition. No way. There is also another reason for the attack against the Union. Tadeusz Gawin is a strong leader. He had the "impudence" to run for parliament. The regime always divides us into good and bad people, friends and enemies. This is a civic war. When I meet my colleagues from Hrodna TV, they hide their eyes from me.

— How would you assess the situation with the Polish minority rights in the region? What are the prospects of development of the Polish community here?

— The community will continue to develop. If for no other reason than because the Union of Poles, which the authorities are fighting against, will continue to exist, no matter what. And it will be headed by Anzhelika Borys. The situation is quite interesting now. Hrodna region has always been closely connected with Poland. Every second person here speaks Polish. That's why, I believe, the Union of Poles will continue to develop. The "official" Union, recognized by the Belarusian authorities, will be financed by the state. The newspaper is sponsored by the state. However, what are they going to do about other programs? How they are going to carry out exchange programs and take students of Polish schools to Poland for vacations? Who is going to sponsor those programs? The Polish government promised support of such activities organized by the organization headed by Anzhelika Borys. The worst thing is that "peaceful agreement" is not possible anymore. The quarrel was so big that reconciliation is absolutely not possible.

— Comparing the size of the two groups, which of them has more people?

— It's a good question. I know many people who are leaving the pro-governmental Union. Many of them are my friends. But I can't find out the exact numbers.

One should always remember about the following. How are the Poles different from the others – Belarusians, Russians, etc? There is nothing worse for Poles than the word "Bolshevism". "Bolsheviks out!" is the Solidarity slogan, which is still popular here. All people here had one common disaster – seizure of property. When those "guys" came here in 1939, only the poor met them with flowers. The rest suffered from them, and such people were the majority. It doesn't mean that everyone was rich here, but most people had a farm and a piece of land. I know hundreds of people who still keep their property documents from those times. Our system taught us to "cower down" in case of danger coming from different sides. This is not tolerance. Belarusian tolerance is just a myth! There is no tolerance here! Vice versa, there is intolerance, which is absolutely bolshevist in its nature. Why did the both sides of the Union quarrel? This is just intolerance to each other! Just as in a tale, in which "sly Poles" elected two

kings. That is happening in reality now. All members have kids and grandkids who may want to study in Poland. I asked them many times: “who do you support?”, “what is your choice?” No one gives me a concrete answer. I don’t judge them, I am just an observer. No one is going to stand openly against Lucznik and the official Union. On the other hand, the authorities would be quite happy to have a Union of Poles which consists of as few as 1000 members, 500 of whom would participate in folk festivals. This way, the Union will continue to fulfill its official function.

— How did T. Kruczkowski manage to wriggle out of the sexual harassment scandal in the university?

— It is astonishing. The case appeared to be very mysterious. I asked him who the girl was, he said he didn’t know. But this is a real story, and a real girl. I asked about her many people in the university. I am surprised she had the courage and dared to accuse him. There are many indirect hints that Kruczkowski could have done that. Many university teachers told me that he really is lacking self-control: “he gets a bang putting his arm round a lady’s waist”. T. Kruczkowski is a senior lecturer of history department. People say he never misses a skirt. I used to have teachers like that when I was a student. But who would raise a scandal? I was surprised the girl had the courage to do that. As the result, Kruczkowski got a job contract for 1 year, not 5. He took the student to court for disparagement. The court found her guilty and made her pay 3 million BYR (about 1500 USD) to Kruczkowski. Then his mother took the girl to court. Now the girl also has to pay 1, 5 million BYR to his mother for insult of her son. Now Kruczkowski is spreading the rumor that the girl is under criminal investigation. I have only one conclusion: these “guys” know how to attack back.

Siarhei Malchyk, head of Hrodna regional organization of BPF Party

— Are there anti-Polish moods in the region?

— The anti-Polish hysteria is stirred up every day on the state TV and radio. It is interesting that after those shows and films we began to encounter situations which we could have never imagined in Hrodna. Once we spoke Belarusian standing on a bus stop. A drunken man came up to us and began yelling: “Hey, Poles, we’ll show you!” This has never happened before that anti-Polish campaign in the state media. In the beginning we thought the encounter was

accidental, but when that happened for the second and third time… When I heard that "You Poles" I realized the brain-washing is real. The second accident happened at the railway station. I was on the phone in the bus.

Some people show very negative reaction to our Belarusian language. They immediately associate that with something Polish and respond negatively. That situation began after the hysteria in the media. I am absolutely sure that this is a purposeful campaign. The conflict with the Union of Poles is only a ground to stir up a deeper conflict. The regime needs an enemy with a Western look. They need an enemy to stifle the opposition. Secondly, Lukashenka is very much afraid of the "colored revolution". Because of that fear he is trying to stop all contacts of Belarusians with the West. That's why I am sure the level of hysteria will only grow with the election coming closer.

— A conversation in Polish language may annoy passers-by?

— When Western Belarus was under Poland, the Polish government carried out a polonization policy. The people were encouraged to register as Poles. My father told me his teacher used to punish him for saying Belarusian words. "You study in a Polish school, so you have to speak Polish", — she told him. In some way that negativism remains until today. That's why people here speak a local, Western-Belarusian dialect. It's not surprising. They are ordinary Catholic Belarusians.

— But there are ethnic Poles here as well. Do they speak Polish on a street or, let's say, in a supermarket?

— Yes, there are such Poles, but not many. They speak Polish in church, between each other and in Polish schools.

— **Now you are united with the Poles by a common political goal – democracy. Even an average citizen associates Poland with democracy. This is a big advantage. It creates solidarity with the Poles. But when democracy comes and the balance is reached, dissatisfaction might appear: "Poles have no limits", they have too many rights, etc… That's logical. This process can be observed on the examples of Georgia, Azerbaijan, the Central Asia, the Baltic States, etc. Even in the countries with good political climate there is some irritation about foreign language…**

— I will give you an example. A friend of mine has a high position in the city executive committee. We do not communicate now, because I am active in politics. He had many problems at

work when we maintained friendly relations with him. He is Orthodox, and his wife is Catholic. They baptized their elder son in an Orthodox church. His wife wanted to baptize the younger son in a Catholic church. When he found that out, he left work early, found god-parents, took the son and baptized him the same very day in an Orthodox church. Then he told his wife that the son had been already baptized. But they live ok even after that incident.

By this example I want to show that a conflict or some other tension may rise on the level of “an Orthodox or a Catholic church”. There are historical grounds for that. The population was many times forced from one religion to another and back. Is there any hostility to Polish language? The stories I told you in the beginning make me worried… Earlier I thought it was not possible. I have changed my opinion. Conflicts on the level of everyday life might happen. They are quite possible.

— This conflict is natural. But there is still another conflict – how to adapt to the new world of globalization? Then that historical memory of self-preservation might be a problem…

— That is possible, but this problem is not the most urgent now. Now we are more concerned about the fact that there are 78% of Belarusians in the country, and there is not a single Belarusian-speaking class in Hrodna. I wanted my son to study in Belarusian. I appealed to the local executive committee, and achieved no result. Belarusian language is taught as a foreign language. This is the main problem for us. The second problem is self-identification of the nation. We want people to understand they are Belarusians and be proud of that. The problem needs to be solved in the future. We will need to restructure the economy, to change the principles of the state system, to bring them to conformity with the European standards – these things are to be done if we want to join the EU. That is why joining the EU will be a long process for us. We will have to work hard to bring the country to European standards. It is impossible to solve these problems without national identification and patriotism in people.

September 6, Hrodna

Uladzimir Khilmanovich, chair of Hrodna regional branch and deputy chair of Lew Sapeha Foundation, journalist, columnist

— We were here on a mission a year ago and discussed the same issue. What changed during this year?

— There are significant changes. One can feel changes for the worse just traveling around the region. Activists of non-governmental organizations and political parties are persecuted. Missions, seminars, and trips are under strict control of the state. There is total control over the local activists. There are few activists left after the campaign of repression and intimidation. The situation has got worse and is getting worse every month and every week.

— We've got an impression that people are afraid of being interviewed. They refuse to talk openly about the problems. Is it really so?

— Yes, there is such a tendency. Many activists of cultural or educational NGOs, people, who have never dealt with politics and have never participated in any political actions, are now afraid of talking about their work. They are intimidated by the local authorities and their employers. They are afraid to lose their jobs. Even people, who were active last year and were ready to raise important issues, don't want to talk now. The majority of such people does not want to discuss the problems openly and do not want to be interviewed. They are afraid. The fear to lose a job is too strong. Due to the contract system the authorities have us all on a tight leash. Anyone who says anything against the government will be fired for a "good" reason or after the contract term is over.

— It is a huge problem to find a job in small towns…

— Yes, it is a problem. In such towns as Berastavitsa, Voranava, or Zelva local activists who lost their jobs for political reasons can't find a new one for 5-7 years. The job market has shrunk. Besides that, small businesses are not developing. Small and middle business is under attack. Only big and criminal businesses can survive. Small and middle-sized owners – the basis of the economy and civic society – are being destroyed purposefully. The "new era" of the early nineties has come to an end. And the attack against businessmen in small towns demonstrates that very well.

— Why do you think the authorities chose Vaukavysk as the place for the last convention of the Union of Poles?

— They didn't want to have it in Hrodna. People could organize protest actions and pickets in Hrodna. It would be easier for reporters to get there. Vaukavysk is different. That's why, probably, the authorities paid so much attention to local members of the Union in Vaukavysk. There is a good venue for holding such events – a conference room in a Polish school.

There is also a Polish school in Hrodna, and a "Polish House" in Lida. There is no good building in Navahradak.

Besides that, there was a *Dazhynki* (Harvesting) festival in Vaukavysk not so long before the convention. That means, all visitors of the town had to go through screening. Before the festival the authorities carried out special measures for festival security. That's why the police did not let the bus with NGO activists enter the town during the festival. The same system worked during the Union convention. In short, there is a number of reasons for choosing Vaukavysk as the place for the Convention.

— How do you think the situation around the Union will develop?

— I don't think the conflict between two sides will grow into something bigger. The overwhelming majority of the active members are pro-democratic. The minority obeys the authorities and they are going to continue to do so. I don't think there will be any confrontation between them.

The "underground" Union of Poles turned into an informal movement. If its members continue their activity in their communities they will be persecuted and repressed by the authorities. They might have legal problems, and so on. But there will be no conflict between the Poles. In order to have a conflict there should be two confronting sides. This is not the case. There are people who used to be real members of the Polish community (now they were pushed underground), and there is a group of people who are serving the regime and are trying to represent the whole Union of Poles in Belarus.

Bialystok region, Poland

***Niwa* weekly for Belarusians in Poland**

Vital Luba, deputy editor-in-chief of the *Niwa* weekly

— The newspaper was founded in 1956 during the "political thaw" after the 20th convention of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

— It was a governmental newspaper, wasn't it?

— One could call it "governmental" since there were no newspapers of other kind. In 1956 the tension in the society reduced, and the authorities decided to let national minorities publish one newspaper and create one organization. In the end of 1955 the editorial team of the weekly for Belarusians was formed. The same year the Belarusian Civic and Cultural Society gathered

for its first convention. The political changes of 1956 precipitated the process.

The first issue of *Niwa*, newspaper for Belarusians living in Bialystok region, came out on March 4, 1956. It covered the issues and problems important for Belarusian national minority in Poland. Certainly, *Niwa* was published by a publishing house which belonged to the Communist Party. The editorial team had to take that into account. They had to keep the newspaper in line with the Party policies. However, despite ideological restrictions, *Niwa* served its purpose facilitating development of the Belarusian community. The weekly promoted the literary Belarusian language and wrote a lot about education. To a certain extent it substituted for some textbooks. Belarusian schools lacked textbooks and teachers' books. While they were prepared, *Niwa* published materials for teachers. The newspaper promoted folk arts and published materials for drama clubs and amateur circles.

With time there were more and more opportunities to write about life and concerns of Belarusian community in Bialystok region on the pages of the weekly. The political conditions changed – there were periods of strict ideological control, followed by periods of relative freedom. *Niwa* reacted to those changes. It began to publish articles about Belarusian public figures active in the period between the two World Wars, whose names had been hushed up for ideological reasons. Such articles have never appeared in the pre-Soviet Belarusian editions. In the 1980's we began to write about Anton Lutskevich, Ihnat Dvarchanin, etc. The newspaper began to write about our heritage and published recollections about Belarusian figures who lived in the Western Belarus. Their names were still concealed in the Soviet Belarus. In Bialystok region such information was slowly seeping out.

In 1993, when big political changes occurred in Poland, *Niwa* left the Communist publishing house and was published by the Belarusian Civic and Cultural Society. Later the Program Board of the *Niwa* Weekly was created. It consists of representatives of 7 or 8 Belarusian organizations (there are more of them in Poland). Since that time the Board has become the official publisher of the newspaper. At present *Niwa* receives grants not from the Ministry of Culture, but from the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

This is the decision of our legislators. The issues of national minorities are to be supervised not by the Ministry of Culture, but

by the Ministry of Internal Affairs. In any case, money comes from the state budget.

Jauhen Wapa, editor-in-chief of the *Niwa* weekly for Belarusians in Poland

Since January 1 the law put all the national minority issues under the competence of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. This is a paradox! In the 1970-1980 that police ministry was trying to destroy everything with Belarusian roots. That's why representatives of national minorities (not only Belarusians) are not enthusiastic about their new "curators". The Ministry of Internal Affairs used to supervise those issues until 1989. Now the situation repeats.

— How can one explain that? What is the official reason for such a change?

— The authorities claim they base on the example of other European states, where the system works this way. You see, for the last 16 years the minorities were not supervised by the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Finally we could breathe with relief – there was no police "over us". And here again… we are coming back to the situation before 1989. A psychological barrier appears. People remember very well what it means when all activities are supervised by the Ministry of Internal Affairs. This is total control and surveillance. That all happened before. Anything of strong ethnic nature was prohibited. We remember that. Now we have a new "master", who is always keeping an eye on us and all our documents.

— Has anything changed after Poland joined the European Union?

— Joining the EU means only more bureaucracy, more papers and reports. Now in order to operate organizations need to employ staff. It is almost impossible for an NGO to carry out activities the old way. NGOs do not have financial and human resources to carry out activities on a professional basis. This is a big problem. The European Union enlargement created new bureaucratic problems for every non-governmental organization. I am talking not only about Belarusian and other national minorities, I mean all NGOs in the country. Bookkeeping, paperwork and other documents – everything needs much more attention now. Every organization is to hire a professional accountant.

— Have censorship and control increased with Poland joining the EU?

— There is no control. There is also no censorship in newspapers. Earlier, before 1989, there was preventive censorship. Before send-

ing each issue to a printing press, the publishers had to receive approval from the censor. Otherwise the printing press would refuse to print the paper. That kind of censorship disappeared after 1989. At least, I can't remember cases when officials would reproach us for publishing this or that material. Sometimes readers don't agree with us, but this is normal.

If an article insults anyone, they can appeal to court. However, we didn't have any incidents of that kind.

— Is the newspaper profitable or distributed free-of-charge?

– We sell the newspaper, but don't get much profit. We get less profit than we need to run the newspaper.

— There are donors…

– The donor is the Ministry of Internal Affairs. It allocates money for us from the state budget. The grant makes up 80% of the newspaper's budget. The rest comes from the sales. The practice is the same for all editions of national minorities. Polish government finances about 40 minority editions.

Hanna Kandraciuk, reporter of *Niwa* weekly, speaks about Belarusian education in Poland:

– Education in Belarusian language appeared here after the war, in 1947. When Belarusians began to migrate to the Soviet Belarus, Poland hoped that all Belarusians would move from Poland to Belarus. In 1948 Belarusian education disappeared from the general education system, but in 1949 it returned. At that time education in Belarusian language began to develop and is still developing at present.

At that time "Belarusian education" meant schools where all subjects were taught in Belarusian language. In 1972 changes came. The schools where the majority of students were from national communities began to teach all subjects in Polish. "Belarusian education" began to mean Belarusian language as a subject in the curriculum.

In 1947 eleven thousand kids were engaged in Belarusian education. At present only about 2 thousand students study in elementary schools, and 1 thousand students – in lyceums which teach Belarusian language as a subject. The numbers are symbolic, and the whole situation with the Belarusian education is tragic. Our young people are 99% assimilated. They speak Polish language among each other. Family has become the main source of Belarusian education: father and mother, grandparents speak Belarusian and pass the language to their children. Schools don't help.

Miraslawa Luksza, writer, reporter of the *Niwa* weekly

— We used to have schools. However, villages are becoming depopulated, young people are moving to urban areas. New modern schools have been built there and equipped with computers. Every year there are less and less village kids. They get to schools by buses. Belarusian language is taught only in a few schools.

I can give you the example of Zaluki village. The teacher, who taught Belarusian language, retired. This year there is no Belarusian language in school curriculum since there is no teacher who can teach Belarusian language. Earlier Belarusian language was taught from the second to the eighth grades. For example, the daughter of my sister studies Belarusian language, and her son – doesn't. When her daughter went to school parents didn't have to file written requests to have Belarusian language in the school curriculum. When her son went to school, the situation changed. After the check-up carried out by the Control Chamber parents have to request a course of Belarusian language for their kids in a written form.

Jauhen Wapa, *Niwa* weekly editor-in-chief:

— One could understand the necessity of such written requests in ordinary schools. However, parents are to write applications even in the schools where Belarusian language is a compulsory subject. We were outraged. The Control Chamber carried out its check-up at the same time as the *Niwa* weekly was attacked. That was an attack against the whole Belarusian community. All Belarusian organizations protested. *Niwa* published their open letter of protest on its pages. The whole Belarusian community of Bialystok region, despite its inner likes and dislikes, signed that declaration.

We have always been concerned about education. The issue became even more difficult in 1972, when some forces began to lobby the idea that Belarusian language should be an optional subject. Who would agree to take additional classes voluntarily? Principals of schools in Hajnowka and Bielsk are very nervous.

Hanna Kandraciuk, reporter of *Niwa* weekly:

— Belarusian education is defenseless. There is no organization which would defend the interests of Belarusian language teachers and students. Some organizations seem to be taking care of that, but in reality they are pro-governmental and do not defend our rights.

Jauhen Wapa, *Niwa* weekly editor-in-chief:

The huge problem of our community is our failure to create an integral mechanism to defend our interests. Now this is the

main problem for us. At the time of conflicts the defense mechanism fails to operate. We do not want or do not know how to defend ourselves. I would say, some Belarusians do not want, and some are afraid to defend their interests. Many are afraid to stand up "against" and openly speak about their rights. People do not understand that democracy is also a struggle. One has to struggle in a democratic world. Struggle is an integral part of that system. Unfortunately, our community is not really aware of that. And the time is working against us. Besides that, it is well known that any education in a diaspora reflects the situation in the spiritual Fatherland. Russification processes in Belarus are a bad example for our kids and young people. They say: "why learn Belarusian language if no one speaks it in Belarus, and there are no Belarusian schools even in Hrodna". This is a negative example for us. I taught history in school for 8 years and I know it is a strong argument. People are looking at the situation in Belarus. We are the minority; we are not the people who are to fight for Belarusian language in Belarus. We are to fight for it in our community. In the beginning of the 1990's, when Belarus became independent and began to build its statehood, our teachers and students showed much greater interest to Belarus, its language and culture. Now everything is vice versa. There is one more problem – the border makes trips for kids and students to Belarus a lot more difficult. We understand that a national minority cannot exist without contacts with the spiritual Fatherland. It is very important for us to organize trips for kids and young people to Belarus. We organize them with our own efforts with the help of teachers and parents. We use personal contacts. We want the kids to see the Belarusian world and to hear Belarusian language, not Russian. Present day Belarus for our kids is a negative example.

Hanna Kandraciuk, reporter of *Niwa* weekly:

— During the last census about 8 thousand people in Bialystok city claimed they were Belarusian. There is education in Belarusian language in Bialystok only since 1995. It all began with a daycare which has been working for 10 years already. There are six classes in the city, which have Belarusian language in their curriculum. There is a gymnasium. The local university has a faculty of Belarusian language. About 150 kids take part in Belarusian education. All of this is possible due to the efforts of parents and teachers. No municipal institutions or NGOs helped us. All projects were initiated by active teachers. Besides that, we have extra-curricular ac-

tivities – a drama club, and a dance group. These activities supplement the education. We have organized two trips for Bialystok school kids to Belarus. Parents paid for the trips. We were able to take about 70 people to Belarus – including parents, kids, grandparents, and teachers. The provinces are being assimilated at huge speed. Villages are dying out. However, we observe a very interesting phenomenon on this background in Bialystok. The parents, many of whom were assimilated long time ago, began to send their kids to learn Belarusian language. They take their kids to Belarusian daycare and learn the language from them. That demonstrates that Belarusian identity does not die out. It reassures us that not all people want to assimilate.

Jauhen Wapa, *Niwa* weekly editor-in-chief:

— There are also Lithuanians, Ukrainians, Tatars, Russians, and the Romany in Bialystok region. There are practically no Jews. They either emigrated after the war, or left to the United States in 1968. There are also Slovak, Czech, and German minorities in Poland. The biggest minorities are Belarusians and Germans. The Germans have their Fatherland which defends the interests of their community. Lithuanians have a similar situation. They have their democratic state, which helps and protects the Lithuanian community in Poland. Similar, although slower, processes are under way with Ukrainians. Compared to other minorities, Belarusians are in the worst situation.

The political division between right and left-wing of the Polish government plays its role as well. There is a stereotype in the minds of people that “left-wing politicians defend minorities, and right-wing politicians are hostile to them”. At least, it is evident in Bialystok city, where the municipality is dominated by Catholic Poles.

— Are election brochures and ballot papers printed in Belarusian for Belarusian-language voters?

— Brochures were published in Belarusian and Polish language.

We have elections on three levels – parliamentary, presidential, and municipal. The Belarusian Committee was working during the municipal election. However, the Belarusian Committee failed to operate during the main – parliamentary – election, which was held in September. The Poles believe that Belarusians always vote for left-wing parties which defend them. The same will repeat during the presidential election.

The Church – Polish Orthodox Autocephalous Church – plays its own role in politics and elections.

— Are the Orthodox Church in Belarus and the Polish Orthodox Church in contact with each other?

— There are contacts between the congregations. However, there is no ideological unity. I asked the local Orthodox activists: "why don't you use the Bible in Belarusian language?" Why don't they have Belarusian Bibles in parishes? The answer is always the same. The church here has a Polish nature, not a Belarusian one. Meanwhile, 75% of all Orthodox believers in Poland are Belarusians. The language, used by the Orthodox Church in Poland, is not Russian, or Church-Slavonic. Priests preach in Polish. In my village the priest works for about 30 years already. He preaches in local dialect. He learned our dialect and speaks it. Metropolitan Sawwa is Ukrainian, not Belarusian. There are Ukrainian Orthodox parishes in some towns. There they have services in Ukrainian language. Here, where Belarusians are concentrated, the Orthodox Church is very Polish and is being polonized further on. You can read more about it in the *Niwa*. It is a very difficult issue for us.

— It is well-known that Polish Catholics are very serious about religion. Religion for them is a major part of their life. Belarusians, just as other post-Soviet people, are only "slightly" Orthodox. They mostly focus on traditions and ceremonies. Are the local Orthodox believers the same way?

— Religion is a very personal thing. There are Catholic Belarusians living not far from the border with Belarus. They speak very good literary Belarusian language but they don't identify themselves with Belarus. They say they are Polish, although they speak Belarusian. In Bialystok region to be "Belarusian" means to be "Orthodox". Historically, religion was the thing that made Belarusians different from Poles. During the period between the two World Wars the Polish Catholic Church turned all Belarusian Catholics into Poles. People were convinced that they are not Belarusians. All Belarusian priests, if they tried to preach in Belarusian language, were immediately sent to the heartland of Poland. The Catholic Church did everything to extinguish Belarusian Catholics. The Catholic Church has definitely been a big polonizer on this land.

The Orthodox Church with its language difference gave Belarusians a feeling that they are different people. Now we have few Catholic Belarusians here. There are some, but really very few. There are areas where they reside compactly. These areas are very close to the border. They speak Belarusian in their everyday life.

But if you tell such person: “you are Belarusian” they may even hit you back, because they call themselves Poles.

Hanna Kandraciuk, reporter of *Niwa* weekly:

— I think Polish Catholicism has its impact on us. We become more religious than Belarusians in Belarus. In our schools we have three classes of religion every week. The day when students go to the first confession, is celebrated as a holiday. People don’t go to work and don’t study that day. We are very much influenced by that.

Jauhen Wapa, *Niwa* weekly editor-in-chief:

— The Orthodox Church, following the example of the Catholic Church, began to participate in the public and social life. In this sense the Orthodox Church wants to catch up with the Catholic Church. It observes the Catholic Church influencing the political processes and tries to copy its manners. In order to understand the situation better one has to remember that after the Second World War the Communists fought against the Orthodox Church. The Church received privileges and benefits, and recovered its land after 1989. Freedom of religion was established; the Orthodox Church received an opportunity to carry out spiritual work in the army, in prisons, etc. Orthodox believers followed the example given by Catholics. It’s interesting that the Orthodox Church received the opportunity to carry out such activities when the right-wing politicians were in power. Still, during the last 15 years the Orthodox Church consistently supported the left-wing parties – the communists, who had been destroying it for so many years. It’s a paradox.

— Is the polonizing policy of the Orthodox Church traditional or the situation used to be different?

Vital Luba, *Niwa* weekly deputy editor-in-chief:

— If one looks at the history of the Orthodox Church after 1918, when Poland emerged and Russia was destroyed, one could see that the majority of members of the clergy were Russian. During the 20 years between the World Wars the state was fighting for diverting the Polish Orthodox Church from Moscow influence. In 1925 Constantinople patriarchy blessed creation of the Polish Autocephalous Orthodox Church.

Since that time the authorities put pressure on the Church, aiming to polonize it. After the Second World War polonization of the Church was stopped, because the authorities fought with religion in general.

The Orthodox Church was polonized gradually, along with polonization of the society. I remember when I went to a Sunday school the priest spoke Russian to us. Now all Orthodox priests here speak Polish. Earlier homilies were delivered in Russian, now they are delivered in Polish. After the Second World War Poland received German lands in the West. Part of local people and Ukrainians migrated there. There they organized Orthodox parishes, but the language in their churches was Polish. For example, In Wroclaw the liturgy and the whole service are done in Polish. Several years ago the council of bishops of the Polish Autocephalous Church adopted and legitimized the translation of all liturgical texts from Church Slavonic into Polish. In some Orthodox churches, especially in the western part of the country, the tradition to recite a liturgy in Church Slavonic is changed to a Polish language liturgy.

September 7, Bialystok

Aleh Latyszonak, research fellow of the Department of Belarusian Culture of Bialystok University, chairperson of the Belarusian Historical Society, member of the Board of the Belarusian Union in Poland.

— I teach history of Great Britain, Poland, and Belarus.

— On what faculty do you teach Belarusian history?

— Philological Faculty of Bialystok University, at the department of Belarusian Culture. We also have an Eastern-Slavic institute of Russian and Belarusian Philology. Ukrainian Philology is not taught in the university. Belarusian presence is historical here. We, Belarusians, managed to keep Belarusian education present in the higher education system.

— Can you tell us about your department and scientific research carried out by Belarusians in Bialystok region? Does your research engage only Belarusian scholars or Polish historians and researchers too?

— This is quite a difficult question. We create our own Belarusian scientific communication in Poland. Polish scholars write about history of Poland, and we write about history of Belarus. Our discussions about that are quite simple. However, it is possible to say that one of Belarusian schools of historiography is being formed in Bialystok.

There are two historiography schools in Belarus – Minsk and Hrodna schools. They reflect the views of Minsk and Hrodna historians. I think the third school is in Bialystok. Unfortunately,

it is not formed into an institute. The Belarusian Historical Society has been working since 1993. In 1997 the Department of Belarusian culture was created. Unfortunately, the project of the Belarusian Institute has been delayed for several years. That could be an institution which would initiate historical research. However, the climate for that is unfavorable. We hope creation of the Belarusian Institute will again become a relevant issue some day.

— How is Bialystok school of historiography different from Hrodna and Minsk ones?

— We, Bialystok historians, have a Polish education. We know Polish postulates and approaches to history, but we also know Belarusian approaches. This is the main difference. We are on the border of the two peoples and two cultures. We see history with the eye of Polish historians, but we also have our own interpretation, our view on the events, because we are Belarusians. In addition, our approach to history is not Soviet-like. Belarusian schools have different models and different methodology. We are closer to the Western-European approach. I think this is our trump card.

As a historian I read both Cyrillic literature and literature written in European languages. We always have an equal number of Cyrillic and Roman sources. Meanwhile in Belarus the use of sources written in non-Cyrillic languages is very limited.

— How different is Polish history in interpretation of Belarusian scholars in comparison to the Polish scientific view?

— It is very different. I wouldn't say it is "distorted", but Polish scholars interpret various events in an absolutely different way. For example, events which we evaluate as negative may be called positive by Polish scholars. For example, the time when Poland was a great state, was the period when we lost our national elite, it is the period of decapitation of our nation. For us that period was not that "favorable". For the Poles it is the example of "flying high", and for us it was falling very low. Taking such moments into account, one realizes that it is impossible to have general history. It can be done on the level of history of art, material history, history of society and development of cities. When we talk about political history, we have different opinions. All our heroes of the period between the World Wars served terms in Polish prisons. That can't be changed.

— How many people are doing historical research?

— There are about 20 people in our Society. The majority of them are professional historians. All of them are Belarusians.

Bialystok school of Belarusian historiography is them. Polish scholars are not that interested in Belarusian history. I think the Polish school of Belarusian history does not exist.

— How do you evaluate the Belarusian studies in general? Ryszard Radzik, for example? Is there a Belarusian studies school in Poland?

— Ryszard Radzik is our colleague. We agree on many things. Belarusian studies exist on the level of philology, and literature, to some extent. Again, it is Belarusian philologists who work in this sphere. Belarusian Studies would not exist in Poland if Belarusian scholars didn't work here.

In my opinion, German scholars are doing a more interesting research of Belarusian history, than Poles.

— What relations do you have with historians from Belarus? Are you in contact with them?

— We have wonderful contacts with Belarusian scholars. We often see each other at conferences; we discuss joint projects and have common plans. I think we can still develop our cooperation and carry out huge projects together.

— What do you think about the attack on *Niwa* weekly?

— I think this is a provocation of the Polish authorities.

— Local authorities?

— No, the government. The local authorities would not dare to organize such a provocation without permission from Warsaw. I don't think someone in the government just sat down and decided to "destroy" us. But, in my mind, there are certain forces on the state level which are interested in that. Because an attack against Belarusians of Bialystok region can be launched only on that level. This is not only my opinion. Many people who analyzed the situation link the current problems to the results of the last census which turned out very positive for us. The census was done in 2002. It registered 50 thousand Belarusians, although everyone was saying there would be only 20 thousand of us. Belarusians are the only national minority who live compactly in a certain area and form a majority there. The areas where Belarusians reside compactly are located near the border. Now this is not only the border of Poland, but the border of the whole EU. I think the reasons for the conflict are rooted here. Besides that, I would like to stress that post-Communists are in power at the moment. When we are speaking about the authorities we should remember they are post-Communist. And *Niwa* environment are the people who are connected with the opposition.

— Do you think the situation will have consequences?

— There are some consequences already. People are afraid. During the last election we did not manage to organize the work of the Belarusian Election Committee. I have only one explanation for that – charges against *Niwa* publishers. At present practically all leaders of Belarusian organizations are under trial. People see they are being persecuted for nothing. This is a signal for the whole society. We are allowed only to "dance and sing" as Belarusians. This is the only thing they permit us.

— What can it lead to?

— They don't like us. What can we do? This is a border. It is well-known that there is ground for conflict everywhere where people of different nationalities live. Moreover, we have people of different religions living nearby. There are periods when these national groups live better, and there are periods when this issue becomes the reason for conflicts. In Poland it happens all the time: liberalization – end of liberalization – thaw – revolution, etc. This is true not only about Polish-Belarusian relations. It is always like that in this country.

— Can it be called "chauvinism"?

— Yes. In my opinion, this is chauvinism when people are prosecuted only because they are of different ethnic origin.

— Can you compare the situation to the one you had one year ago? For 12 months Poland is a member of the European Union…

— The situation has got worse. Last year we spoke only about possible charges. Now we see the results. There is no Belarusian Election Committee anymore. We are not going to run for Parliament.

— Local election will be held in a year. Are you going to run?

— We have some plans and put all our efforts to make them possible.

— There is a Commissioner for national minorities in the OSCE. Do you inform him about the situation?

— We are happy that such European Commissioners do not take interest in us… We used to have a regional level official here. He behaved as a master and tried to tell us what to do. At first we asked to appoint that official, and then we spent a year to have him recalled. We are satisfied with the official we have now. He doesn't do anything, and does not bother us.

— Your assessment is quite negative. Can it get you in trouble if it is voiced publicly?

— Sure it can. They will not take me to jail. The authorities will not take open actions against Belarusians. However, the Polish community will criticize me when they find that out. This is already happening. We decided we would not make any official statements about the situation with the Union of Poles in Belarus until the Polish authorities drop charges against *Niwa*. We do not want to criticize Poland to make Lukashenka happy.

— What do you think is the reason for the conflict around the Union of Poles in Belarus?

— Belarusian authorities have shut down all Belarusian organizations, now they are dealing with Polish ones. This is the result of the very system. The Belarusian government will not support any independent organization. There is no sense to expect that.

— Has the life of the Belarusian community and the borderland changed after the EU enlargement?

— I didn't notice any influence or any changes. I didn't expect any changes. I was against Poland joining the EU because I think it does not help to solve any problems. The EU is just a simulation of activity.

— Is there any political party in Poland which would defend the interests of national minorities?

— No.

— There was an information campaign in Poland during the conflict of the Belarusian authorities with the Union of Poles. Did the campaign in the media influence the attitude to the local Belarusians?

— The Polish press has played a terrible role. It warmed up the anti-Belarusian sentiments.

— Did they campaign against Belarusians in general or against the regime?

— They began with the regime, and then developed the topic and went beyond all borders. In particular, *Gazeta Wyborcza* – the biggest newspaper in Poland – took a very strong anti-Belarusian stand. For example, the title of the article was "To Destroy the Poles", and the story of how Poles are being exterminated in Belarus. Ordinary people are not thinking about who is doing that – Lukashenka or someone else.

— The campaign in the Belarusian press led to more cases of anti-Polish sentiments and statements in Hrodna region. Has the anti-Belarusian campaign in the Polish press influenced the attitude of people here?

— For example, in the Internet conferences one can see such statements as "you don't like it here — move to Belarus". These are the mildest statements. *Niwa* reported about an incident of armed violence.

— If democracy wins in Belarus, and Belarus joins the EU, will it change the attitude of the Polish government to the Belarusian national minority?

— I don't know the answer to this question. I can say only one thing. When Belarus is a democratic country, not a European pariah, it will be a lot easier for us. No one would stifle the Belarusian national movement in Belarus; the Belarusian authorities would not be the example of an enemy for Poland... We are looking forward to it. We would feel great relief immediately. How will it happen? I don't expect much from the authorities. However, I also hope that change of power in Poland will have a positive impact on our situation.

— Poland comes to the defense of Poles in Belarus, who are oppressed by the authorities. Does Belarus do the same for Belarusians in Bialystok region?

— You should be aware of the fact that *Niwa* publishers and their circle are the people Lukashenka's regime would never stand for. Moreover, such "defense" would only make our ill-wishers happy.

September 7, Bialystok

Jauhen Czykwin, MP, the Union of Left-wing Democratic Forces

— What do you think about the situation of the Orthodox Christians and Belarusians in the region? Is there any tension or malevolence?

— There are things which have been formed for ages. We are standing on the border of the Western and Eastern traditions of Christianity. For many centuries our community adhered to the opinion that our faith is Orthodoxy. Our traditions and culture were constantly under threat of western predominance. Such events and history as the Brest Unia are the evidence of that. My wife wrote a doctoral thesis on the topic "Belarusian minority as a stigmatized group". She based on Hoffmann's theory. It says that we, Belarusians living in Poland, consider ourselves, our situation and psychology the group of "negative destiny". There's a lot to be said about that. Even if a Belarusian in Poland can't give any concrete examples, and can't really answer the question: "how does

that negative destination manifest itself?", still he would say: "They don't like us". What does it mean? Many don't even ask such questions.

There are facts in the post-war history and the actions of the Polish underground against the Belarusian population, how they badgered our children, or history of our ancestors... My daughter asked me coming from school: "Dad, why are we *katsaps*?" Yes, Poles gave us this nickname. In our turn, we often call them "rebels".

There were more serious cases. I have proofs of cases when people were fired from work because of their ethnicity or religion. There is also certain hostility and comments on the level of personal relations. That's why we and our young people try to communicate within our own circle. This is because Poles (often — unintentionally) can hurt or offend us, and not even notice it. It all has the same roots – Poles feel they are somehow better than eastern peoples – Belarusians, Russians, Bulgarians, Romanians. I think this happens because they feel they are part of the Western culture and Roman civilization.

— Is that "chauvinism"?

— This is a very strong word. They just think they are better because they belonged to that civilization. This is a very delicate question. I think this phenomenon is common for places with minority groups. This kind of "stigmatization" is very widespread. On that background we can see certain nuances of the Belarusian-Polish relations.

— How can you describe the level of political cooperation between the Orthodox Belarusians and Catholic Poles on the local level?

— Belarusians reside compactly, and this is for the better. The power of electorate is taken into account in a democratic system. During the last 7-8 years regional self-governments have become very important in the structure of public administration. Health care, education, and culture are in their competence. They operate as local parliaments. In order to be able to form the government on the local level one needs to have 15 councilors, i.e. the majority. In the areas where Belarusians reside, the question "are we going to have a right-wing or left-wing government?" often depends on one vote. It turns out that Belarusians have that key vote. They claimed if no Belarusians got in the local government, both political forces would get the Belarusian vote. As the result,

leader of the Belarusian Society Syczeuski is a member of the regional government.

Democratic system forces them to take us into account. Certainly, they could form the government without Belarusians, but because there are our representatives there, the situation is getting back to normal. And the prospects are good.

— You've said the majority of Belarusians have left-wing political views…

— Yes, that's true. But the situation is going to change when we have more young people. I represent the left-wing forces at present. There are historical reasons for that.

The opinion of our people about the post-war situation (creation of the People's Republic of Poland, etc) is different from the opinion of the Poles. Belarusians felt the post-war changes were positive. Before the war we were deprived of the opportunity to have a career, the Orthodox Church was persecuted… In 1938 many Orthodox Churches were destroyed. That did not happen in Bialystok region, but it all occurred in the south of Poland. 180 churches were ruined in one month. Besides that, everyone remembers the actions of the Polish underground… After the war such village kids as us received an opportunity to go to school. Changes, which were important for Poles, for example, restriction of freedoms, were not that important for us, because we all lived in the rural areas. The situation here was not similar to the situation in the Soviet Union. The land remained in private hands, there were no collective farms, and people were not forced to join them. Belarusians reasoned: we are allowed to go to church, kids can go to school, everything is ok (the price was that they couldn't demonstrate they were Belarusians). The older generation has a favorable opinion about that time.

Before the war people were very poor. My mother told me she used to dig potatoes in Brest region for 1 zloty a day. One could buy a kilo of sugar for 1 zloty.

In the 1980's the Solidarity movement, especially in these areas, was strongly associated with the Catholic Church. For many Belarusians that meant the return of the bad times which they still remembered. The security structures and the Communist party knew that and used that to warm up such sentiments. That's why the majority of Belarusians voted for the left-wing forces. However, I think this is going to change quite soon.

— Were the consequences of the campaign in the Polish media which covered the situation around the Union of Poles

negative for Belarus? Did the press speak negatively only about Lukashenka regime or also about Belarusians and Orthodox Christians?

— For many years Poles put Americans on the first place answering the question "what nation do you view most favorably?" They put Roma people on the position of least favorable nation. Belarusians, Russians, Jews are somewhere not very far from them. The campaign in the press and the situation around the Union of Poles only made such sentiments stronger. In Poland they have a very strong feeling of duty and mutual assistance to Poles who live abroad. From the very beginning, when the problem appeared, I told the Belarusian Ambassador: "No one will listen to you, even if you are 100% right". Poland was to have elections soon. Any Polish politician is to defend the Diaspora. This is a principle. All that stirred up the atmosphere even more.

There is only one thing that would insult the Poles more than pressure on the Polish community in Belarus – dishonoring the memory of John Paul II – he is a saint for the Poles. I think we will see the consequences of that pressure in the future. The attitude to Belarusians will get worse. Still I hope it will not take any radical forms.

The majority of mass media in Poland are private. That's why all stories about Belarus published during the last 7-8 years are negative. They speak only about Lukashenka. They forget that there are people, and culture, and some other things in life. Still, no. Take any article about Belarus – it will be about politics and about Lukashenka, all negative. It gets so absurd sometimes! Some teachers when they go to Hrodna to read lectures take water with them… They are thinking one should not leave the hotel because they might be robbed and murdered, and one should take food and water along. It's getting so crazy!

A friend of mine came to Hrodna and got on a bus to Minsk. On the way he got in a conversation with a driver. My friend says: "I hear stealing is a big problem here". The driver replies: "Yes, but not as big as in Poland…"

— What was the impact of the EU enlargement on the life of the national minorities?

— The state did not increase assistance to national minorities from the national budget. It remained on the same level. About 6 million zlotys was allocated for support of national minority groups. I proposed an amendment in the second reading. As the result the

amount was increased by 700 thousand zlotys. I can't say it doesn't mean anything because all our publishers work with the help of the budget money.

The new law on national minorities will lead to positive results in the future. It allows placing bilingual street signs, but requires permission of the local councils. No decisions were made yet. As far as I see, they are not even going to do that. The older generation does not want to make tongues wag.

— Has Poland changed its immigration policies after joining the European Union? Especially in the case of Belarusians who want to become Polish citizens?

— I don't think there are significant changes here. I know that Poland gives political asylum to Chechens. But they are to meet the same standards as in Europe. It is not easy to get a status of a refugee.

— Is labor emigration a big issue in Poland?

— Yes, it is. Especially it is spread among young people. When Poland joined the EU Polish citizens received a chance to find a job in many countries. In 2 years Germany will open its borders for our labor migrants. Many go to work to the Western countries because of our high unemployment rates – about 20%.

— Now minority issues are in competence of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Earlier it was the Ministry of Culture that dealt with minority groups. What is the reason for the change?

— The new Law was adopted. According to the new law, all minority issues were given to the Ministry of Internal Affairs. If minority groups were more active in their negative response it might have been possible to avoid that. I was against such a change. The minority NGOs, including Belarusian ones, just missed the whole thing. When the parliament sent them the draft Law and asked for feedback, the majority of organizations did not even respond. We began hearing negative remarks only when the Law was in its third reading. The Ministry of Internal Affairs used to deal with minority issues before the war. People remember that and it makes them concerned. I don't think this is a change for the better, but I can't say there's anything really bad in the idea. "It was bad before the war", — this is not a strong argument at present. The government was happy that national minorities did not protest.

— What are the possible advantages and disadvantages of such a change?

— The advantage is that the structure dealing with national minorities is concentrated in one Ministry. The people working in the structure are professionals who used to do the same work before. Some officials from the Ministry of Culture were offered jobs in the Ministry of Internal Affairs so that they could continue to work with national minorities. The Ministry of Internal Affairs also deal with the issues of religion.

September 7, Bialystok

Marcin Rebacz, chairperson of the Education Center "Poland-Belarus" and Jauhen Wapa, editor-in-chief of *Niwa* weekly for Belarusians in Poland

Marcin Rebacz, chairperson of the Education Center "Poland-Belarus":

— Has the conflict around the *Niwa* weekly received much public response?

— The conflict received much response thanks to *Kurjer Poranny* newspaper. The newspaper is sold primarily in Bialystok city. But this is a regional newspaper, distributed all over the region. *Kurjer Poranny* published a number of very aggressive articles about *Niwa*.

Kurjer Poranny mostly circulates in Bialystok. However, it also has many readers in the whole region, including Hajnowka, Bielsk-Podlaski, and other areas where the Belarusian minority is concentrated. The people who were interested in minority issues or representatives of the minority could buy that newspaper and read its articles. *Kurjer Poranny* gave them its own interpretation of the situation around *Niwa.*

The articles in *Kurjer Poranny* harmed the Belarusian minority at least twice. People who were indifferent to minority issues read the newspaper and made their conclusions about the problems with *Niwa.* They based their opinion only on the articles published by *Kurjer Poranny*. People believe newspapers in our country. On the other hand, people in Bialystok city, the Poles, could also form their opinion about the situation, because *Kurjer Poranny* is the most influential newspaper in the city. This way the problem was presented to the Polish readers.

— What exactly was said in the article?

— The problem was presented the following way. There is a branch of the Supreme Control Chamber in Bialystok. This structure enjoys confidence of average Polish citizens because theoreti-

cally it is independent from the authorities and apolitical. However, in practice it is not really like that. The chairperson of the Control Chamber is elected by the Parliament (Sejm). Still, the Chamber keeps to the principles of independence and it is possible to say that in general it is independent from the politicians. The article in *Kurjer Poranny* referred to the report of the Supreme Control Chamber about the results of the check-up in *Niwa*. The article was presented in a scandalous manner. The heading on the front page read: “Gone with the *Niwa*”. In the first paragraph they said *Niwa* could disappear as a newspaper, because the Control Chamber had revealed serious violations in usage of the grants given by the Ministry of Culture. *Kurjer Poranny* claimed that the publishers swindled money from the Ministry of Culture. Allegedly, they wrote project proposals with excessive budgets and applied to the Ministry for grants. Then, it was claimed such serious violations might become the reason for complete disappearance of *Niwa*.

When someone writes that a newspaper might be shut down or could disappear, the reader immediately gets an impression that there were huge financial misappropriations. It is not a regular practice to shut down newspapers in Poland. That can happen only for really very serious violations.

In general, the readers could understand from the article, that the publishers of *Niwa* had stolen money. The amounts of “stolen” money mentioned in the article seemed quite big for Bialystok readers. 190 thousand zlotys is the quote, and the attempt to receive 100 thousand zlotys. All in all, the amount gets close to 100 thousand dollars.

The article was presented in a biased way. On the front page the reader could read about the violations, about the check-up by the Supreme Control Chamber, and the possibility that the newspaper could be shut down. They also published a picture: paper ships – folded from *Niwa* newspaper – are floating away. I.e. *Niwa* is floating. In Polish language that means something like “their goose is cooked”.

This way, on the front page they publish negative facts and the report of the Supreme Control Chamber. Everything else — what Jauhen Miranovicz was saying on behalf of *Niwa,* and statements of members of the Program Council and publishers in their defense — was published separately on the other page of the newspaper.

— What harm has it done?

— I think the biggest harm was done to the Belarusian community. The Belarusians in Bialystok, Hajnowka, and Bielsk, who read the article, could really believe that *Niwa* team had stolen money. Others came to conclusion that it was an attack against the Belarusian community and they needed to be on the watch. The Poles could react: "Oh, these Russians, the *Katsaps*, they are the thieves". A whole research of the consequences could be carried out, but no one did that.

However, the reaction on the Internet conferences of many Polish newspapers showed that the majority had read the article and made the negative conclusions I've just told you about.

— What did they write on the Internet?

— Many responses were published on the Internet conference of *Gazeta Wyborcza*. People wrote incendiary statements: "the *katsaps*, they stole the money", "is it possible that Poland would ever finance such a paper", "get out of here and go to Belarus", "Russian dogs", etc. There were quite many posts like that. Those were personal statements, but it was one of the most frequent forms of response.

Maciej Cholodowski, *Niwa* columnist, appealed to the Prosecutor's office: "If there are such things posted on the web-sites, shouldn't the Prosecutor's office do something about that?" The Prosecutor replied she didn't know anything and had not been informed about that. Maciej Cholodowski said he was informing her and gave her the print-outs from the web-site. A reporter of *Gazeta Wyborcza* was present during that session. He went back to the office and told the editors what was going on. Soon such statements were deleted from the web-site.

These articles really did much harm to us. I would blame *Kurjer Poranny* for the fact that everyone learned about the situation around *Niwa* as about a "fraud". The approach of the other newspapers was more considerate. However, no one showed the problem from *Niwa's* point of view. No one even made an attempt to find out the view of its publishers on that topic. The other newspapers were not that aggressive. They wrote shorter articles…

18 months later the Prosecutor's office began to work on the case. Quite unexpectedly, they publicized much information about the course of investigation. Usually, the Prosecutor's office avoids comments while the case is still under investigation. Usually, the Prosecutor's office would respond: "we do not confirm and do not

refute", or "we confirm that the case is under investigation". In *Niwa* case, the Prosecutor's office was actively informing the press about the course of the process. Many times they mentioned that *Niwa* people face from 2 to 8 years of imprisonment. The investigation is not over, and they are already "predicting" up to 8 years of jail. Sure, they would later "add" that "it may not happen", but the press focused on concrete numbers – "8 years of jail". The mass media repeated it over and over again. Aggravation grew. The Belarusian community read the information and learned what punishment the publishers were facing. The whole thing was a threat to the Belarusian community.

Jauhen Wapa, *Niwa* weekly editor-in-chief:

— The Prosecutor's office piled up the agony only to say in the end that "*Niwa* did not steal a zloty". There was a "financial confusion", but no one stole the money. In reality, the problem was that the grant money was transferred with delays. The Ministry of Culture, our donor, did not have any claims to us. The money, which we were to receive in January, was transferred only in June or July. The prosecutor's office accused us of paying with that money in January. Officially, we could use the money only from June till October. But we have to pay every month, because the newspaper is to come out all year round.

Now the contract is signed for 12 months – from January to December. It turns out they accused us of mistakes made by the Polish government. It was not our mistake, but a mistake made by the state! And they threatened us with 8 years of jail when, according to them, we had not stolen a cent! The Prosecutor's office confirmed that.

11 people are under investigation. 9 of them are leaders of Belarusian organizations which make up the Belarusian Union. The whole independent Belarusian movement is paralyzed. We cannot run at elections because we all have criminal charges instigated against us. The Prosecutor's office suggests we should plead guilty and receive a 1-year conditional sentence of imprisonment. Meanwhile, they call us "good people" and recognize that we "did not steal a zloty". We do not agree because we do not admit our guilt.

We are paying for that. The elections are coming, and the Belarusian movement can't create an Election Committee. Everybody is sitting quietly. We can't do anything.

— If the Ministry of Culture which was your donor does not have any claims to you, the whole case seems to be politically-motivated?

— It is politically-motivated.

— If your reputation has been damaged, is there a way to defend your rights?

— The matter is that Polish non-governmental organizations, human rights organizations, or political parties did not support us openly. We appealed to the Helsinki committee in Warsaw asking for support. No! What a disappointment! I took part in the anti-communist movement in the eighties. I used to believe that Poland is a lawful state. I was fighting against the communists. And today we are under investigation because of someone's political will!

— Whose political will is it?

— We have no answer to this question. We don't know who is behind that case, and who needed it at the moment. But we are sure it is politically-motivated". For example, the prosecutor, who is leading the prosecution, has just been promoted... Everything goes on according to the scenario. We have our suspicions, but can't say them publicly. We think that there are forces which want to destabilize the situation on the border of the European Union. Someone wants to make this border a "hot spot". Someone is interested in having conflict in this area. In his work *The Clash of Civilizations* Samuel Huntington stated that the most dangerous regions are the Balkans and the Hrodna and Bialystok region. He believes that future conflicts may come from friction between two civilizations of the Western and Eastern Christianity. It is not only the border of civilizations, it is also a geopolitical border: NATO and CIS, European Union and the Union of Russia and Belarus, etc.

— Do people here have any sentiments about joining Belarus?

— Belarusians in Poland do not have such plans.

— If Belarus joins the EU, there will be no border at all.

— This is our dream.

Marcin Rêbacz, chairperson of the Education Center "Poland-Belarus":

Someone wants to keep control over the Belarusian minority in Poland. I believe it will continue until left-wing forces, the post-communists are in power in Poland. There was a moment when Belarusian movement could turn into a political force. Possibly, *Niwa* was persecuted to put pressure on people who could represent political views of the Belarusian minority and become leaders of the independent Belarusian movement in Bialystok region. I suppose the *Niwa* case was a provocation by the left-wing forces.

Well, right-wing political forces could also provoke the case. They may reason: “let those *katsaps* vote for the left-wing SLD – this is not a problem. It will be a problem when they start voting for themselves”. Such independence could be really significant. But I am just guessing and conjecturing. I would like to stress that. There are no facts that could prove it.

— You use the word “*katsaps*” quite often. We know this is a nickname for Russians. But it is a degrading word. In Poland they also mean Belarusians by that nickname?

— Yes. This nickname is for all Orthodox people, who came from the East and speak other language than Polish. Even if a Georgian spoke Russian, he would be a “*katsap*”.

Jauhen Wapa, *Niwa* weekly editor-in-chief:

— From time to time we can make fun of ourselves and say this word. Earlier Belarusians used this word as a nickname for Russians. In short, as you move on to the East, you meet more and more *katsaps*. In a modern context it means an “Easterner”, a person who came from the East. The problem is that these lands used to be the most underdeveloped area in the country. The government did not invest here. For forty years the government carried out a systematic policy in order to depopulate these areas. The authorities wanted the Belarusian population to move to the heartland of Poland. They pressed on Belarusians with various economic factors. There was no investment. The most terrible experiments were conducted here. For example, collective farms. The majority of collective farms were created here. People were not given land, equipment, they were under-paid. Meanwhile, in a Polish village, just across the road, everything was different. The reason was that 300 thousand Belarusians resided compactly in that area. Now they are saying that this area is the “green lungs of Poland”. That means, only woods can be grown here, and the people should be moved out. It used to be like that. Now, again, this ecological concept is considered to be the most progressive.

— How can the Belarusian community demonstrate to the state that they support Poland no less than the Poles?

— I am not going to try and prove I am not four-legged. I think everything what we have done during all these years is an obvious evidence of our position.

We, our generation, wanted to show that Poles and Belarusians can come to agreement, that it is possible to live and work together. Everything was alright. Then, all of a sudden, it turned out

that no one needs our joint projects on the local level. May be they prefer to have two muddy aquariums – Poles and Belarusians – which have nothing in common.

We do not have any sentiments about creation of our own autonomy. We just want to have a right for cultural self-identity.

— Really, there are four levels of self-identification – cultural, ethnic-cultural, an autonomy, and secession (complete separation). It turns out that your level is not dangerous to Poland.

— There are 7 national minorities in Poland: Belarusians, Germans, Lithuanians, Ukrainians, Jews, Slovaks, and Czechs. These communities live in Poland for at least 150 years. They have links to their spiritual Fatherland. According to Polish laws, a national minority (for example Belarusians) is a minority which has relations with its spiritual Fatherland (for example, Belarus). Ethnic minorities are communities which do not have a state which could be called their Fatherland. For example, Kashubians – they have their language, their history, their literature, but no state.

In 1989 we said that Belarusians can and should make their own decisions about their affairs. Culture, language and education – we can solve all these problems on our own. We want to participate in municipal elections and that's why we have our Belarusian Election Committee for.

— Do you want to create a political party based on the ethnic principle?

— There is a Belarusian party – the Belarusian Democratic Union. The Union ensures the presence of Belarusians on the political arena. The Polish legislation allows that. Belarusian minority is the only minority in Poland that has an own political party. We participate in elections – that is our political activity. This year Belarusians failed to take part in elections because of the charges against *Niwa*.

— What can your colleagues from Belarus and international organizations do to help you in the situation with *Niwa*?

— The support we felt when the investigation began is most important. We received much support from Belarus and the Belarusian Diaspora from all over the world. The Polish Sejm, The President, the prime-minister, and the minister of Foreign Affairs were addressed with many letters. In the letters people stated that they were concerned about persecution of *Niwa* and that the publishers faced such s serious punishment only for a bookkeeper's

mistake. There were dozens of such letters, with dozens of signatures. For us it is a proof that if Belarusians are attacked in Poland, Belarusians all over the world will not stay indifferent. This is Belarusian mutual aid and solidarity. Not only Belarusians but also some Poles stood up for us. Only few of them, though. For me personally it was very important that Tadeusz Gawin – the founder of the Union of Poles in Belarus – expressed his support to us. His support was very important because he is the person who understands what an attack against a national minority is. He put his own signature in our support.

— Did Polish human rights organizations pay attention to the situation?

— No. Senator Ramaszewski showed an interest. He is a well-known human rights defender. He and his wife visited us. Then he wrote a letter to our minister of Justice. In his letter he stated he considered such treatment of us inadequate. Other human rights organizations, Helsinki Committee, for instance, did not pay any attention.

— Did you talk to them?

— Yes, Professor Jauhen Miranovicz appealed to them. They left his appeal without response.

— What about European organizations?

— We did not address European organizations separately. But we mailed all copies of the letters, which had been sent to the Polish structures, to the European bodies – the European commission, the European Parliament, etc.

When the trial begins, presence of the people from Belarus, our friends and colleagues who will come to be with us, will be a huge support for us. It would be great if European human rights organizations learned about the trial over *Niwa* and paid attention to it.

At present the Prosecutor's office has dropped practically all charges. It claims not a zloty has been stolen. Why does the persecution continue?

The Polish media have created a very negative attitude to us. Certainly, we hope for fairness of the court. But if someone is found guilty we will appeal against this decision and will go as far as the European Court. We are ready for that.

— Do you work with lawyers?

— Yes, we have two defenders. They are from Bialystok and are very well-known in our circles. It would be too much for 1 lawyer to defend 11 people.

1. “Belarus—Poland Borderland” mission is about to begin. Viktar Sazonau and Malkhaz Chemia. Minsk, September 2005.

2. Malkhaz Chemia, Stanislau Sudnik and Andrei Kazakevich. “Belarus—Poland Borderland” mission. Lida, September 2005.

3. Catholic Church of Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Vialikaya Berastavitsa village (Belarus), XVII century

4. Catholic cemetery in Voranava town. “Belarus—Poland Borderland” mission. September 2005.

5. Uladzimir Khilmanovich and Malkhaz Chemia. Navahradak. Catholic Church, where famous poet Adam Mickievicz was baptized. “Belarus—Poland Borderland” mission. September 2005.

6. Participants of the “Belarus—Poland Borderland” mission. Malkhaz Chemia, Palina Stsepanenka, and Andrei Kazakevich. Navahradak, September 2005.

7. Kazimir Misiura and Malkhaz Chemia. Voranava. “Belarus—Poland Borderland” mission. September 2005.

8. The Union of Poles in Belarus. Hrodna.

9. Tadeusz Gawin, founder of the Union of Poles of Belarus, and Palina Stsepanenka. “Belarus—Poland Borderland” mission. Hrodna, September 2005.

10. Mieczyslaw Jaskievicz and Andrzej Paczobut. “Belarus—Poland Borderland” mission. Hrodna, September 2005.

11. The Polish House. Lida.

12. Parliamentary elections in Bialystok region. Poland.

13. Uladzimir Khilmanovich. Hrodna. “Belarus—Poland Borderland” mission. September 2005.

14. Hanna Kandraciuk, Bialystok. “Belarus—Poland Borderland” mission. September 2005.

15. Aleh Latyszonak, Bialystok. “Belarus—Poland Borderland” mission. September 2005.

16. Miraslau Ramaniuk, Hajnowka. “Belarus—Poland Borderland” mission. September 2005.

17. Orthodox cemetery at Wierstok village, “Belarus—Poland Borderland” mission. September 2005.

18. Orthodox crosses near the church. Podlachia. “Belarus—Poland Borderland” mission. September 2005.

19. Belarusian lyceum in Hajnowka. Podlachia. “Belarus—Poland Borderland” mission. September 2005.

20. Jauhen Wappa and Michas Andrasiuk. Belavezha woods. “Belarus—Poland Borderland” mission. September 2005.